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Walters, Frank

Studies of some of Shakespere's plays









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STUDIES OF SOME OF SHAKSPERE'S PLAYS.



WILLIAM SHAKSPERE.

STUDIES

OF SOME OF

Shakspeare's



Plays.

BY

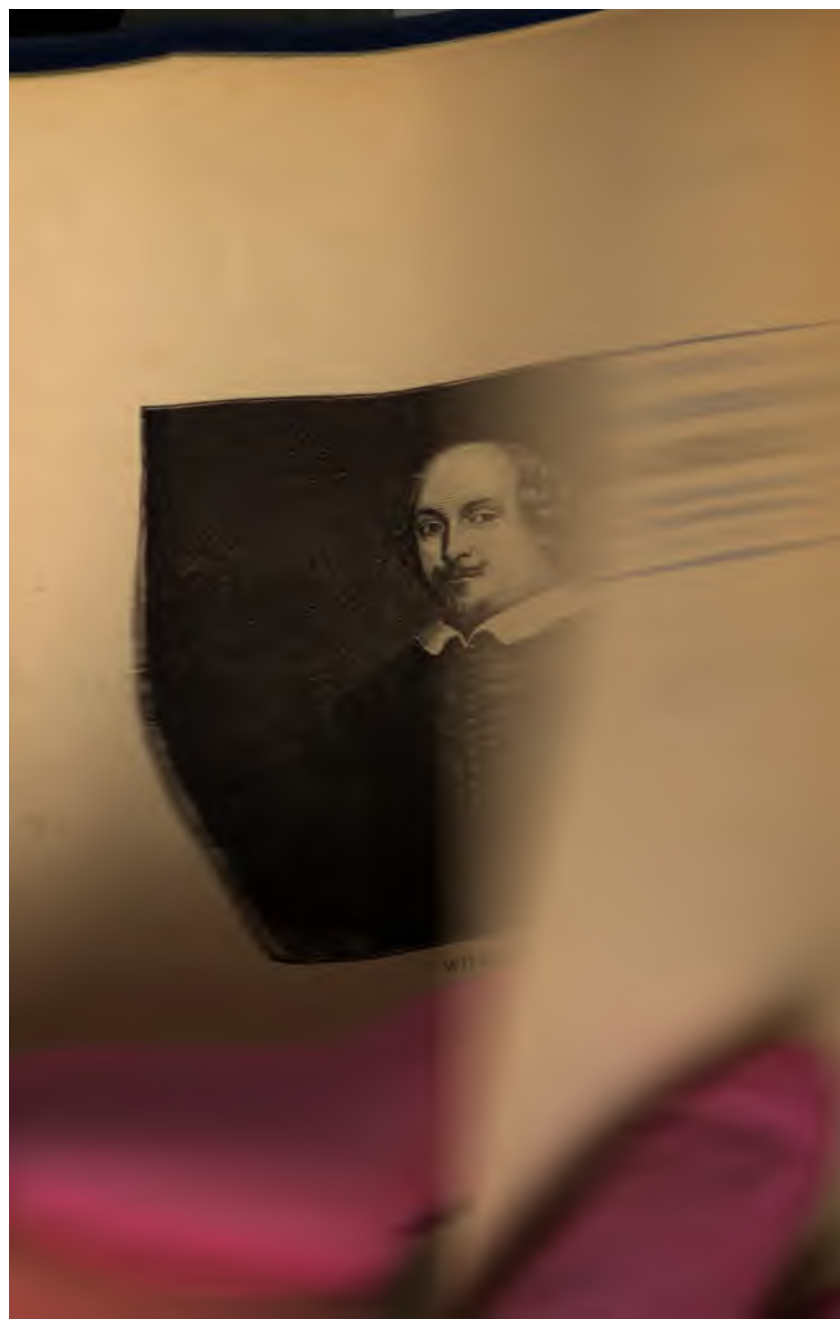
FRANK WALTERS.



LONDON :

SUNDAY SCHOOL ASSOCIATION,
ESSEX HALL, ESSEX STREET, STRAND, W.C.

1889.



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66

TO
MY DAUGHTER
KATIE WALTERS.

P R E F A C E .

THE two most notable productions of English literature are the Authorised Version of the Bible and the works of William Shakspeare. Many publications of the Sunday School Association are devoted to the study of the Bible, and the present volume is intended to help parents, teachers and elder scholars to appreciate the treasures of wisdom contained in the writings of our greatest dramatist. To our younger readers I would strongly recommend, as an introduction to the plays, the little book called *Tales from Shakspeare*, by Charles and Mary Lamb. At the close of the preface to these *Tales* we have this beautiful estimate of the poet's works : 'What these tales shall have been to the *young* readers, that and much more it is the writers' wish that the true plays of Shakspeare may prove to them in older years—enrichers of the fancy, strengtheners of virtue, a withdrawing from all selfish and mercenary thoughts, a lesson of all sweet and honourable thoughts and actions, to teach courtesy, benignity, generosity, humanity: for of examples, teaching these virtues, his pages are full.'

NOTE.

I AM indebted to the extensive Shaksperian literature for many suggestions in the writing of these *Studies*; but I have not thought well to cumber the pages with notes acknowledging my obligations. I must, however, mention the name of JOHN WEISS, who has done so much to encourage the study of Shakspere in the United States. His essay on *Hamlet* is the most masterly interpretation I have met with; and wherein I have ventured to differ from his exposition of one important passage, proof is afforded of the measure in which he has taught me to read the play for myself without prejudice or bias.

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SHAKSPERE.

*'Others abide our question. Thou art free.
We ask and ask - Thou smilest and art still.
Out-topping knowledge. For the loftiest hill
Who to the stars uncrowns his majesty,
Planting his steadfast footsteps in the sea,
Making the heaven of heavens his dwelling-place,
Spare but the cloudy border of his base
To the foil'd searching of mortality;
And thou, who didst the stars and sunbeams know,
Self-school'd, self-scann'd, self-honour'd, self-secure,
Didst stand on earth unguess'd at.- Better so!
All pains the immortal spirit must endure,
All weakness which impairs, all griefs which bow,
Find their sole voice in that victorious brow.'*

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

INTRODUCTION.

THE LIFE OF SHAKSPERE.

SHAKSPERE has not been dead three hundred years, he belonged to a period of English history of which we have ample records, we have abundant information of many of his contemporaries; and yet of the greatest man of that age we have the most unsatisfactory knowledge. Hallam, in his *Introduction to the Literature of Europe*, says, ‘All that insatiable curiosity and unwearied diligence have hitherto detected about Shakspeare serves rather to disappoint and perplex us, than to furnish the slightest illustration of his character. It is not the register of his baptism, or the draft of his will, or the orthography of his name that we seek. No letter of his writing, no record of his conversation, no character of him drawn with any fulness by a contemporary, has been produced.’ The personal Shakspeare is, then, to a large extent, a problem. We have to try to guess what he was by the works he wrote. And even here, again, we are baffled. In many cases the character of a writer is clearly expressed in his books; you can gather a good deal of information about Dickens and Thackeray and George Eliot from their novels; you can make a tolerable guess as to their mental peculiarities, personal habits and forms of character. But not so with

Shakspeare ; the man himself is hidden behind the creations of his genius ; he drops his self-hood for the time, and becomes the various characters of the play. By his surpassing poetic sympathy with every phase of human nature he veils his own personality most effectually. He reveals humanity with such disinterestedness, that he fails to reveal himself. If there had been anything narrow, partial, small in his genius, he must have shown it in some inevitable one-sidedness. He accepts the universe, he mirrors every aspect of human nature in his art ; and so in studying his poems we are unable to decide his personal character and mode of life. Of course we know *the best* of him by our acquaintance with his genius ; but our very reverence for his genius makes us anxious to know some of the details of his history. Let us, then, gather up the few facts we do know of the life of Shakspeare.

These few facts give us more information about his surroundings than about Shakspeare himself. But even this is valuable. The kind of soil in which a tree is planted and the climate in which it grows have great influence upon its development. The greatest man is the child of his age, is influenced by his education, and largely formed by his environment. Born in a different age or under other circumstances he might still have been great, but most likely in a different direction. And, remembering this, we must not too much undervalue these few details of Shakspeare's history.

I.

BIRTH AND BOYHOOD.

THE first thing we love to say about Shakspeare is that he was *an Englishman*. It was our England that gave him birth ; it was in our fair Warwickshire he first learnt to love

nature ; it was in our great metropolis he wrote his dramas ; it was in a peaceful English town he spent the last five years of his life ; it is one of our beautiful churches that holds his sacred dust ; and, above all, it is our noble English tongue in which the creations of his genius are clothed. And he himself gloried to be an Englishman ; his universal sympathy was quite compatible with the truest patriotism. In a number of his plays English history is set to music ; they have been appropriately called our English Epic ; and the Duke of Marlborough said he knew nothing of his national history but what he learnt from the pages of Shakspeare. In *King Richard II.* we have that famous patriotic utterance of John of Gaunt :—

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise ;
This fortress built by nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war ;
This happy breed of men, this little world ;
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands ;
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,
Fear'd by their breed, and famous by their birth,
Renowned for their deeds as far from home,
(For Christian service and true chivalry,) *
As is the sepulchre, in stubborn Jewry,
Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's Son ;—
This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land,
Dear for her reputation through the world,
* * * * *
England, bound in with the triumphant sea,
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
Of watery Neptune.

His native county of Warwickshire has been called 'the heart of England,' and amidst its peaceful scenery he gained his intimate knowledge of country life and his tender love of wild flowers. Throughout his plays he extols the healing, calming, restoring influences of nature. In *As You Like It* he transports the men and women, one by one, away from the turmoils and jealousies and meannesses of the court into the spacious forest, under the greenwood tree; and in the presence of nature's peace and beauty old animosities are healed, friendships restored and wounded hearts made whole. He has often been called the poet of humanity, and just as truly is he the poet of nature. Our best known English flowers are enshrined in his verse with some endearing epithet. He sings of spring-time as the season

When daisies pied, and violets blue,
And lady-smocks all silver-white,
And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue,
Do paint the meadows with delight.

In *Cymbeline* Arviragus, weeping over the bier of Fidele, makes the promise :—

With fairest flowers,
Whilst summer lasts, and I live here, Fidele,
I'll sweeten thy sad grave : Thou shalt not lack
The flower that's like thy face, pale primrose ; nor
The azured hare-bell, like thy veins ; no, nor
The leaf of eglantine, whom not to slander,
Out-sweeten'd not thy breath.

In the *Winter's Tale*, that sweet 'queen of curds and cream,' the gentle Perdita, laments that she cannot give her guests the flowers of the spring :—

Daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty ; violets, dim,

But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes,
Or Cytherea's breath ; pale primroses,
That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bright Phœbus in his strength—a malady
Most incident to maids ; bold oxlips and
The crown-imperial ; lilies of all kinds,
The flower-de-luce being one !

She has only the ' flowers of middle summer ' :—

Hot lavender, mints, savory, marjoram ;
The marigold, that goes to bed wi' the sun
And with him rises weeping.

The lanes, the farms, the streams, the woodlands, the country gossip, the simple rustic life, the daily round of rural labour,—these are frequently illustrated with loving minuteness in his poems ; and these descriptions he drew from the experience of his native Warwickshire. In the struggle of his London life he never forgot his dear native place. Once a year, we are told, he used to come home and visit his family and breathe fresh air ; and when he had made a little fortune, it was at Stratford he purchased an estate, and lived a few peaceful years before his death.

Stratford-on-Avon, at the time of Shakspeare's birth, was little more than a country village, built chiefly of wood, and containing only two large buildings, the church and the Guildhall. Strolling players would sometimes give performances in the Guildhall ; and here, doubtless, Shakspeare first became acquainted with the drama. The house in Henley Street, where the poet was born, is still preserved, and here pilgrims from every part of the world come to enter the very room where the baby Shakspeare first saw the light, ' mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.' He was born in the month of April, 1564 ; and it is interesting

to notice how often he speaks of the charm of that early month of spring-tide.

In the 98th Sonnet we read :—

From you I have been absent in the spring,
When proud-pied April, dressed in all his trim,
Hath put a spirit of youth in everything.

And in *Romeo and Juliet* Capulet speaks of the season

When well-apparell'd April on the heel
Of limping Winter treads.

We cannot be sure of the day he was born, but there is a legend that he died on the anniversary of his birth, and we know, from the inscription on his tombstone, that the date of his death was April 23rd, 1616.

The name of Shakspeare was common in Warwickshire three or four hundred years ago. About three miles from Stratford was a village called Snitterfield, where there lived a well-to-do farmer, named Richard Shakspeare (grandfather of the poet), the tenant of a landowner named Robert Arden. The Ardens were a wealthy county family of knightly descent. Richard Shakspeare had a son named John; Robert Arden had a daughter named Mary. A year after her father's death, Mary, an heiress with landed property, was married to John, and by this union the father of the poet started life a prosperous and wealthy man.

John Shakspeare seems to have tried his hand at a great many trades. We know he was a glover, but he is given other titles which hint the numerous businesses he attended to. In one deed he is styled 'yeoman;' in a certain list he is included among 'the gentlemen and freeholders;' according to one authority he was a butcher; another calls him 'a considerable dealer in wool.' He held some

honourable appointments, which testify the high regard in which he was held by his fellow-townsmen. At different times he was appointed Chamberlain, Alderman and High Bailiff.

I am afraid that education, in our sense of the word, was miserably neglected in those days. Very few of the members of the Corporation of Stratford could write their own names, and among those who used to put their 'mark' was John Shakspeare. His wife was as imperfectly educated as himself; and it seems a curious fact that the supreme writer in English literature was the son of a man and woman who had never learnt to write their own names. There has been much discussion about the quantity and quality of the education given to their son William, who was the third of eight children. There was a grammar school at Stratford, and his father, being a member of the Corporation, would have the privilege of sending his children there free of cost.

Some have tried to make out that Shakspeare was a very learned man, but I think they have quite failed. It is not likely that he would get much scholarship at the village school, and he entered on the business of life too soon to be able to carry on his studies into wider fields of learning. So in his childhood we may think of Shakspeare as

the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school,

very much like the other lads with whom he romped and played, picking up such scraps of learning as the village schoolmaster could impart. We have several proofs that Shakspeare was not a scholar in the technical sense of the word. The tales from which he took his plots were evidently read by him in translations. One of his familiar

books was North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*. In Ben Jonson's address to him he says :—

And though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek,

In London he seems to have acquired some knowledge of French and Italian, but only the merest smattering.

II.

FAMILY TROUBLES AND MARRIAGE.

SHAKSPERE was taken very early from school. His father's circumstances became greatly embarrassed, and the boy had to be kept at home to give what assistance he could to the poverty-stricken family. Before he was fourteen years of age some sad calamity overtook the household, and for years they were in very straitened circumstances. We have ample historical proof of this decline in fortune. In 1578 John Shakspeare and his wife mortgaged the estate of Ashbies which she had inherited from her father, and even sold the reversionary interest in some houses at her old home at Snitterfield. We are sure they must have been hard pressed by poverty before they consented to such sacrifices as these. And there are some official records at Stratford which tell a sad tale. It was agreed in the Town Council that every Alderman should 'paye towards the furniture of thre pikemen, ij billmen, and one archer, vjs. iiijd. ;' but Alderman Shakspeare was so poor that they let him off for 'iij. s. iiijd.' Later on it was ordered that every Alderman should contribute fourpence a week as poor-rate, but it was agreed that John Shakspeare should 'not be taxed to paye anythyng.'

This was evidently going from bad to worse. The poor man's name also appears in a list of defaulters in a tax

levied to provide armour and defensive weapons. At another time a writ was issued to distrain his goods; and the return was made that he had no goods to be seized. At last he was actually arrested, and there is still preserved a copy of the writ which was produced at the time. He seems to have kept the respect of his fellow-townsmen through this season of trouble, and he retained his office of Alderman as long as it was possible. But in September, 1586, we find the following register of the Corporation:— ‘At thys halle William Smythe and Richard Courte are chosen to be Aldermen in the places of John Wheler and John Shaxpere; for that Mr. Wheler dothe desyre to be put owt of the Companye, and Mr. Shaxpere dothe not come to the halles when they be warned, nor hathe done of longe tyme.’ Another memorandum tells its sad tale. In the State Paper Office there is a record, dated 1592, of those who have not obeyed the Act of Conformity by attending Church at least once a month. ‘Mr. John Shackespere’ is among these delinquents, but not because of any heresy or love of dissent, for opposite his name and those of eight others we read:—‘It is sayd that these laste nine coom not to Churche for feare of processe for debtt.’ Through all this troubled period he managed to keep his house in Henley Street; and he certainly kept the respect and trust of his neighbours, for in the very midst of his misfortunes we find him called to accept the responsible duty of taking inventories of the property of deceased persons. Before his death in 1601 the poor old man seems to have had a short return of prosperity, which, it is supposed, was brought about by the help of his son William, who had made his way in London as a successful dramatist. Those years between 1578 and 1601 had worked great changes for William Shakspeare. The troubles began when he was a child of thirteen years, and he was a man of thirty-six when his father died. From

the time he left school until he went to London, about twenty-two years of age, we know very little of the events of his life. We have four different accounts of the business to which he was apprenticed. One report tells us he was apprenticed to a butcher; other authorities make young Shakspeare a schoolmaster, a wool-stapler, and an attorney's clerk; so that amidst these conflicting statements we are obliged to confess our ignorance of the young man's occupation. Before he went to London he was married, at the age of nineteen, to Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older than her husband. His wife was the daughter of a farmer at Shottery, who had died twelve months before this marriage took place. We have no reason to suppose that Shakspeare's married life was unhappy. But some have tried to find an unkind feeling towards his wife in the only reference he makes to her in his will, where he bequeaths to her his 'second best bed with the furniture.' We must, however, remember that there was little need to mention his wife at all, because she was well provided for as the heiress of all Shakspeare's freehold property; so that the condition securing for her the 'second best bed' most likely had a touch of tenderness in it which we are unable to appreciate; the words, which to the critic's eye look so cold and paltry, may have moved some sacred memory in the widow's mind. I am sure Shakspeare was one of the tenderest men, and I like to think that the only words regarding his wife which have come down to us were inspired by fondest love. He was much absent from his wife during his long career in London as a play-writer; but this was necessary, for it devolved on him to retrieve the fortunes of his family. Besides, travelling was a serious matter in those days, and a mother with her children could not very well be carried backwards and forwards between Stratford and London. And I do not think that when he first left Stratford he

intended to remain in London. The great city never weaned him from his native village, where at last he came home to die. He never loved the kind of life he led in London; and some of his sonnets tell us how he rebelled against the conditions of the theatrical world. The player, in those days, was a sort of outlaw, against whom magistrate and mob would on occasion heap insults. A theatrical company could only be sure of protection by placing themselves under the patronage of some great man. The atmosphere of the theatre was, no doubt, repulsive to a pure and noble nature; and I am not surprised that Shakspeare kept his wife in the sweet Stratford home, where he visited her faithfully once every year, until at last he came there to rest after his laborious life. It must have been a hard struggle for him; it was doubtless for bread that he went to toil in London; and perhaps, but for that hard necessity, these plays might never have been produced.

There is a story which professes to give the occasion of Shakspeare's first visit to London. Here it is in the words of his earliest biographer. 'He had, by a misfortune common enough to young fellows, fallen into ill company; and amongst them, some that made a frequent practice of deer-stealing, engaged him, more than once, in robbing a park that belonged to Sir Thomas Lucy, of Charlcote, near Stratford. For this he was prosecuted by that gentleman, as he thought too severely; and in order to revenge the ill-usage, he made a ballad upon him. And though this, probably the first, essay of his poetry be lost, yet it is said to have been so very bitter, that it redoubled the prosecution against him, to that degree, that he was obliged to leave his business and family in Warwickshire for some time, and shelter himself in London.' That story is a very likely one. Shakspeare was just the sort of man to be led away by fun and frolic; and he would have enjoyed tormenting the stiff,

stately old magistrate by taking him off in some comic poetry. Sir Thomas Lucy was a great man in the neighbourhood, a Member of Parliament, and a rigid Puritan; and we know that at this very time he was getting up some stringent laws for the protection of game; so that there is much collateral evidence for the story of the deer-stealing. I will not quote the one verse which has been preserved of this pasquinade on Sir Thomas; but I may remark that it contains a wretched pun on the words *Lucy* and *lousie*, because this explains a very obscure passage in the first scene of the *Merry Wives of Windsor*. Justice Shallow is terribly wroth against Sir John Falstaff for attacking his lodge, thrashing his game-keepers, and killing his deer; he and his cousin Slender keep up an echo between them of the greatness of the ancient house of Shallow that must not be insulted by such a scurvy fellow as the fat knight. Slender says that the coat of arms of the Shallows has a dozen white *lucres* in it; 'it is an old coat' boasts Shallow in confirmation; at which Evans, the Welsh parson, makes an atrocious blunder and cries, 'the dozen white louses do become an old coat well!' Now, when we find that Sir Thomas Lucy's family had twelve *lucres*, or pike fish, on its coat of arms, we may reasonably regard Justice Shallow as a caricature of the pompous Puritan magistrate.

Carlyle makes a great deal of this story of the deer-stealing; he suggests that we might never have heard of Shakspeare but for that boyish frolic. These are his remarks:—'Curious enough how, as it were by accident, this man came to us. I think always, so great, quiet, complete, and self-satisfying is this Shakspeare, had the Warwickshire Squire not prosecuted him for deer-stealing, we had perhaps never heard of him as a Poet! The woods and skies, the rustic life of Man in Stratford there, had been enough for this

man ! But indeed that strange outbudding of our whole English Existence, which we call the Elizabethan Era, did not it too come as of its own accord ? The "Tree Igdrasil" buds and withers by its own laws,—too deep for our scanning. Yet it does bud and wither, and every bough and leaf of it is there, by fixed eternal laws ; not a Sir Thomas Lucy but comes at the hour fixed for him. Curious, I say, and not sufficiently considered : how everything does co-operate with all ; not a leaf rotting on the highway but is indissoluble portion of solar and stellar systems ; no thought, word, or act of man but has sprung out of all men, and works sooner or later, recognisably or irreognisably on all men ! It is all a Tree : circulations of sap and influences, mutual communication of every minutest leaf with the lowest talon of a root, with every other greatest and minutest portion of the whole. The Tree Igdrasil, that has its roots down in the Kingdoms of Hela and Death, and whose boughs overspread the highest Heaven.'

These thoughts of Carlyle are appropriate as we close this second period of Shakspeare's history. The silent, interior life of the man, out of which grew this great Tree of Poetry,—how we wish we could understand it more fully ! And yet to any one who has the eye to see and the heart to feel, these few events of his early career are very significant ; these facts, which look so commonplace to us, had deep influence on Shakspeare's character ; we think of them as *happening to him*, but they all *entered into him*, and became vital in the development of his genius. This far-seeing, tender, sympathetic man must have been deeply moved by all those changes in the little world of Stratford. That busy household, where he was born, with its numerous children, the village school, the sudden misfortune that put a speedy end to his education, the pinching poverty,

the wretched anxiety, the crushing debt, the brave struggle with want,—these were the scenes and events amidst which the young lad grew up. In the midst of family troubles, at nineteen years of age, he fell in love with and married a lady eight years older than himself; then came the births of children, first a girl, then twins, one of them a boy who only lived eleven years. What a fight he must have had to help his father and provide for his home! Quite early in his married life there was the foolish quarrel with the Squire, and the sudden escape from the little world of Stratford into the great unknown world of London. At last he has found his mission, he will go to the theatre and be a playwright. We may imagine the horror of his friends when the descendant of the Ardens and Shaksperes entered on such an ignoble occupation; while he himself was often homesick amidst the uncongenial associations of his London life. All these things were making Shakspeare, deepening his experience, enriching his heart, instructing his mind, preparing the soil and watering the roots of the luxuriant Tree of Poetry. Storms as well as sunshine were needed; all the circumstances of life were useful in the building up of his genius. It seemed a terrible storm which uprooted him from Stratford and planted him in London; and yet that 'great mistake,' as it seemed to his friends, was to result in an immortality of fame. In London he found his vocation, the one thing he could do best; and as a playwright he was destined to become a King of Thought and a Poet of Humanity.

III.

LIFE IN LONDON.

SHAKSPEARE seems to have commenced his life in London as an actor, but he soon found that his supreme talent lay in

dramatic poetry. We should like to have a full description of Shakspeare on the stage. There is no evidence that his acting was a great success, though we have his own strong convictions as to the qualifications of a good player; the man who wrote the following words of advice to a company of actors must have had a very high conception of dramatic art:—

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance, that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise: I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant; it out-herods Herod; pray you avoid it. Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first, and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this, overdone, or come tardy off, though it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure of the which one must in your allowance, o'erweigh a whole theatre of others. O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly, not to speak it profanely, that, neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed, that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably. And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them; for there

be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too; though, in the meantime, some necessary question of the play be then to be considered: that's villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it.

We feel quite sure that in these words Hamlet speaks the very sentiments of Shakspeare. Shakspeare had a noble ideal of dramatic art, and in the coarse theatrical world of London he must often have seen it vulgarised and profaned. With such an ideal Shakspeare must at least have been a refined and careful actor; he would not barter the good opinion of the judicious to secure the empty laugh of a whole theatre of the unskilful. It is curious that the parts which are said to have been entrusted to Shakspeare all represented old man; these were the Ghost in *Hamlet*, Adam in *As You Like It*, and Knowell in Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*. We have some favourable remarks on his acting. Chettle speaks of him as 'excellent in the quality he professes.' Aubrey says, 'he did act excellently well.' But we are ready to believe that very soon his fame as a writer eclipsed his histrionic reputation. Wright, in his *Historia Histrionica*, published in 1699, tells us he had heard that Shakspeare 'was a much better poet than player.' His biographer, Rowe, informs us that he was distinguished, 'if not as an extraordinary actor, yet as an excellent writer,' adding, 'I could never meet with any further account of him this way, than that the top of his performance was the Ghost in his own *Hamlet*.' The profession seems to have been distasteful to him, and he soon gave it up to devote himself to literature. The conditions of an actor's life in London were offensive to his better nature and finer feelings. His purpose in going to London was to make a living and restore the fortunes of his family; only for this did he submit to the degradations

and indignities of a theatrical career ; and as soon as he discovered his power as a writer, he gladly left the stage for ever.

In his sonnets he tells us how he hated the life into which he was plunged so many years, how he felt himself stained by its contamination, and how scandal had been busy to charge him with its sins. These sonnets were evidently written to some dear friend.

O, never say that I was false of heart,
Though absence seem'd my flame to qualify.
As easy might I from myself depart
As from my soul, which in thy breast doth lie :
That is my home of love : if I have ranged,
Like him that travels I return again,
Just to the time, not with the time exchanged,
So that myself bring water for my stain.
Never believe, though in my nature reign'd
All frailties that besiege all kinds of blood,
That it could so preposterously be stain'd,
To leave for nothing all thy sum of good ;
For nothing this wide universe I call,
Save thou, my rose ; in it thou art my all.

Alas, 'tis true, I have gone here and there
And made myself a motley to the view,
Gored mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear,
Made old offences of affections new ;
Most true it is that I have look'd on truth
Askance and strangely : but, by all above,
These blenches gave my heart another youth,
And worse essays proved thee my best of love.
Now all is done, have what shall have no end :
Mine appetite I never more will grind
On newer proof, to try an older friend,
A god in love, to whom I am confined.
Then give me welcome, next my heaven the best,
Even to thy pure and most most loving breast.

O, for my sake do you with Fortune chide,
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
That did not better for my life provide
Than public means which public manners breeds.
Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,
And almost thence my nature is subdued
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand :
Pity me then and wish I were renew'd ;
Whilst, like a willing patient, I will drink
Potions of eisel 'gainst my strong infection ;
No bitterness that I will bitter think,
Nor double penance, to correct correction.
Pity me then, dear friend, and I assure ye,
Even that your pity is enough to cure me.

These confessions tell a sad story. The young man was plunged into the whirlpool of London life with all its temptations, he was surrounded by companions of doubtful character, was forced upon the stage when the profession was suspected and despised, and compelled to make himself a ' motley to the view ; ' no marvel that, amongst quiet and respectable friends, his name became branded with evil doings, that there was danger of his nature becoming ' like the dyer's hand,' subdued to what it worked in. Even if he was guilty of some excesses, we dare not harshly condemn him after the repeated cry for pity, the sorrowful confession, the gracious penitence, the longing to gain purity even by correction and suffering. At the same time, I believe there is ample proof that Shakspeare's faults were not very heinous, that his nature could not ' so preposterously be stained ' as to alienate the sympathy of good men.

There was a contemporary dramatist named Greene, a merciless satirist and a man of very loose character, who on his death-bed wrote a pamphlet called *A Groat'sworth of Wit bought with a Million of Repentance*. There was

more of scurrilous abuse in this composition than of genuine repentance ; and, after Greene's death, when Henry Chettle printed it, its pages were found to contain such offensive references to Marlowe and Shakspeare, that the publisher was forced to apologise ; at least in the following public explanation he apologises to the latter, but does not seem to care whether Marlowe is offended or not ; and the different tones in which he speaks of the two great dramatists is very significant. ' With neither of them that take offence was I acquainted, and with one of them (Marlowe) I care not if I never be : the other (Shakspeare), whom at that time I did not so much spare as since I wish I had, for that as I have moderated the heat of living writers, and might have used my own discretion (especially in such a case), the author (Greene) being dead, that I did not, I am as sorry as if the original fault had been my fault, because myself have seen his (Shakspeare's) demeanour no less civil, than he excellent in the quality he professes ; besides, divers of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writing, that approves his art.' Now this testimony is of priceless worth ; his conduct is extolled, his acting pronounced ' excellent,' he is regarded as a man of honour by worthy people, and his happy genius for writing is already acknowledged. I think we may conclude that Shakspeare did not go so far astray as the confessions in the sonnets would seem to suggest ; we are thankful to be able to honour him as a man as well as reverence him as a poet, and to believe that his character was upright and chivalrous. A far greater poet than the scurrilous Greene, Edmund Spenser, spoke of him in high terms. About 1591 Spenser wrote a poem called *Colin Clout's Come Home Again*, and in it are these lines, where there can be no doubt of the allusion to Shakspeare :—

And then though last not least is Aetion ;
 A gentler shepherd may nowhere be found ;
 Whose muse, full of high thought's invention,
 Doth like himself heroically sound.

Aetion, the name under which Shakspeare is spoken of, means an eagle, and of course the last line refers to the warlike name of Shake-spear.

We have other testimonies of the high estimation in which Shakspeare was held by his contemporaries. There was a close friendship between him and Ben Jonson, who wrote a eulogy on his brother dramatist dedicated 'To the memory of my Beloved, the author, Mr. William Shakspeare;' and in another place he says, 'I loved the man, and do honour his memory, on this side idolatry, as much as any.' The following lines in Jonson's eulogy inform us that the fame of Shakspeare attracted the notice of Queen Elizabeth and King James :—

Sweet Swan of Avon, what a sight it were
 To see thee in our waters yet appear,
 And make those flights upon the banks of Thames
 That so did take Eliza and our James !

It is not surprising that Elizabeth thought well of the poet, who paid her such an elegant compliment in the *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Though she was the greatest queen the world ever saw, she was incorrigibly vain, and loved flattery ; how, then, could she resist such honeyed words as these ?—

That very time I saw, but thou couldst not,
 Flying between the cold moon and the earth,
 Cupid all arm'd : a certain aim he took
 At a fair vestal throned by the west,
 And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow,
 As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts ;

But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quench'd in the chaste beams of the watery moon,
And the imperial votaress passed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy free.

We are told that Elizabeth was so amused with the character of Falstaff in *Henry IV.* that she commanded the poet to describe the fat knight in love; and in obedience Shakspeare wrote *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Shakspeare appears to have been a good companion, full of gentle fun and wholesome humour. Burbage tells us he was a 'worthy friend and fellow;' Jonson speaks of him as 'indeed honest, and of an open and free nature.' The leading club in London at that time had been founded by Raleigh at the Mermaid Tavern. Here the leading wits used to meet and spend glorious hours together, among them Shakspeare and Jonson. If Shakspeare had only been accompanied by a Boswell, what priceless records should we have possessed of those nights of social jollity and intellectual intercourse! Fuller gives us a glimpse of the scene, where he says: 'Many were the wit-combats betwixt him (Shakspeare) and Ben Jonson, which two I behold like a Spanish great galleon and an English man-of-war: Master Jonson (like the former) was built far higher in learning, solid but slow in his performances; Shakspeare with the English man-of-war, lesser in bulk, but lighter in sailing, could turn with all tides, tack about and take advantage of all winds, by the quickness of his wit and invention.' 'The intercourse of those great men has immortalised the *Mermaid*; in one of his poems Keats imagines that in the Elysian Fields those choice spirits of the past must still hold their meetings:—

Souls of poets dead and gone,
What Elysium have ye known,

Happy field or mossy cavern,
 Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern ?
 Have ye tippled wine more fine
 Than mine host's canary wine ?
 Or are fruits of Paradise
 Sweeter than those dainty pies
 Of Venison ? O generous food !
 Dressed as though bold Robin Hood
 Would, with his Maid Marian,
 Sup and bowse from horn and can.
 I have heard that on a day
 Mine host's signboard flew away,
 Nobody knew whither, till
 An astrologer's old quill
 To a sheepskin gave the story,—
 Said he saw you in your glory,
 Underneath a new-old sign
 Sipping beverage divine,
 And pledging with contented smack
 The Mermaid in the Zodiac.

Souls of poets dead and gone,
 What Elysium have ye known,
 Happy field or mossy cavern,
 Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern ?

IV.

FAME, PROSPERITY, AND RETURN TO STRATFORD.

ONE important event in Shakspeare's life was his friendship with the Earl of Southampton. In 1593 he published his first work, not a play, but a poem founded on classical mythology, called *Venus and Adonis*; and this 'first heir of my invention' he dedicated to the young Earl, nine years his junior. This dedication is still prefixed to the poem in the editions of Shakspeare's works; and it is interest-

ing to notice how modestly the young author writes about his production, and promises that 'if the first heir of my invention prove deformed, I shall be sorry it had so noble a godfather, and never after ear so barren a land, for fear it yield me so bad a harvest.' In another year patronage and respect have ripened into friendship and affection, and a second poem is dedicated to Southampton in these words:—

The love I dedicate to your lordship is without end ; whereof this pamphlet, without beginning, is but a superfluous moiety. The warrant I have of your honourable disposition, not the worth of my untutored lines, makes it assured of acceptance. What I have done is yours ; what I have to do is yours ; being part in all I have, devoted yours. Were my worth greater, my duty would shew greater ; meantime, as it is, it is bound to your lordship, to whom I wish long life, still lengthened with all happiness.

The friendship of this noble, courtly, cultured young peer speaks worlds for the character of Shakspeare ; if the poet had not been far superior in morals and manners to the theatrical people around him, he could never have won the esteem and love of this high-minded nobleman.

The year 1593 saw the first printed poem from Shakspeare's pen, and for many following years he produced on the average two plays every twelve months. When we think of all that a play of Shakspeare's involves, we must marvel at this intellectual fruitfulness.

The origin and chronology of these dramas afford a tempting field of study into which I cannot enter. At first he tried his hand at refurbishing old plays, and adapting them for the stage. The three parts of *Henry VI.* are among the plays enlarged and remoulded by him, which contain portions that he never wrote. That is one of the first things that the student has to learn, that in the so-called 'Plays of Shakspeare' there are some passages which must not

be ascribed to him. As he acquired skill and courage, he attempted greater things ; he would take some old romance or antique story, and transfigure it by his kindling imagination, until the legend grew into a mighty poem, reflecting the tragedies and triumphs of Humanity. Though we cannot settle all the vexed questions of the chronology of these plays, we are able to trace in them FOUR PERIODS. Shakspeare's genius grew with his experience, and his works reflect in a marvellous way his own intellectual and spiritual progress. Professor Dowden most happily applies to these periods four epithets.

I.—IN THE WORKSHOP.

II.—IN THE WORLD.

III.—OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

IV.—ON THE HEIGHTS.

The following is an arrangement of the plays according to this order :—

1ST PERIOD.—*Titus Andronicus. King Henry VI., pt. 1. Love's Labour's Lost. Comedy of Errors. Two Gentlemen of Verona. Midsummer Night's Dream. King Henry VI., pts. 2 and 3. King Richard III. Romeo and Juliet. King Richard II. King John.*

2ND PERIOD.—*Merchant of Venice. King Henry IV., pts. 1 and 2. King Henry V. The Taming of the Shrew. Merry Wives of Windsor. Much Ado about Nothing. As You Like It. Twelfth Night. All's Well that Ends Well.*

3RD PERIOD.—*Julius Cæsar. Hamlet. Measure for Measure. Troilus and Cressida. Othello. King Lear. Macbeth. Anthony and Cleopatra. Coriolanus. Timon of Athens.*

4TH PERIOD.—*Pericles. Cymbeline. The Tempest. The Winter's Tale. King Henry VIII.*

This is a wonderful story of growing power. When we

compare the two extremes of Shakspeare's work, we can realise the marvellous progress he made,—how through thought and trial and experience he rose into such creative genius.

During Shakspeare's London life he worked hard, became famous, and made a fortune. Through all those years he held to his one purpose to return to his native place and buy an estate there; neither the patronage of the great nor the fascination of the metropolis could make him forget his home at Stratford; and he wished for no better reward than to spend his last years in his lovely Warwickshire. Early in his career a terrible sorrow came, which blasted his hopes of founding a family. At eleven years of age his twin son Hamnet died, in 1596, three years after the publication of *Venus and Adonis*. The anguish of the father must have been terrible in this bereavement; this was, doubtless, one of the experiences which deepened his spiritual life, and gave him that profounder acquaintance with human nature revealed in the progress of his writings. And yet, however terrible that stroke of death, it never made him swerve from his purpose. The following year Shakspeare purchased one of the best houses in Stratford, called the New Place. That must have been a great event. At twenty-two years of age he left home a penniless scapegrace, and now at thirty-two years he is a landed proprietor, well-to-do, a boon companion of some of the first men in London, and a friend of a distinguished nobleman. A year later is the date of a letter still in existence proving the social position of Shakspeare. A Mr. Quincy was then in London begging from Lord Burleigh that certain favours be granted to the town of Stratford. While he is busy on this errand, he receives a letter from Mr. Abraham Sturley, who makes quite sure that Mr. Quincy will get all he wants through the powerful friends of Mr. William Shakspeare.

In the same year in which he undertook the errand to London, Quiney wrote a letter to the poet, asking for a loan of £30, and evidently did not expect a refusal ; this letter is specially interesting, because it is the only one addressed to Shakspeare which has come down to us. In this way we have abundant evidence that Shakspeare was regarded as rich in friends and money, and was believed to be generous in his use of both influence and gold. This year (1598) is also remarkable for a valuable notice of the poet by a writer named Francis Meres ; which reads as follows :— ‘As the soul of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagoras, so the sweet witty soul of Ovid lives in the mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakspeare ; witness his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, his sugared *Sonnets* among his private friends, etc. As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latins, so Shakspeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage ; for Comedy, witness his *Gentlemen of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Love's Labour's Lost*, his *Love's Labour's Won*, his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and his *Merchant of Venice* ; for tragedy his *Richard II.*, *Richard III.*, *Henry IV.*, *King John*, *Titus Andronicus*, and his *Romeo and Juliet*. As Epicius Stolo said that the Muses would speak with Plautus' tongue, if they would speak Latin, so I say that the Muses would speak with Shakspeare's fine filed phrase, if they would speak English.’ That is a most valuable piece of evidence ; it tells us that all these poems and plays enumerated were written before 1598, although very few had been published ; and it lets us know that at the age of thirty-four Shakspeare had already circulated his ‘sugared sonnets’ among his private friends. I need not say how important all this is to the careful student, who wishes to trace the development of the poet's genius.

In 1601, when Shakspeare was thirty-seven years of age, his father died. The following year *Hamlet* was entered in the Stationers' Register, and the author purchased one hundred and seven acres of land in Old Stratford for £320. About 1604 he wrote *King Lear*, and in that year he brought an action against a debtor for the recovery of £1 15s. 10d., the price of some malt he had sold. I like to connect these miracles of genius and these transactions of business. In this man there was an excellent sanity and a beautiful completeness. As George Dawson once said of him:—'He wrote *Macbeth*, and knew the multiplication table; he wrote *King Lear*, and would have bothered a surveyor at his own craft; he wrote *Hamlet*, and knew the exact value of the land he bought; he wrote *Othello*, and made a will; he wrote *Romco and Juliet*, and bequeathed his second best bed to his wife. The east wind went all round him, and found no crack. He had the most consummate genius and the profoundest common sense.'

In 1605 Shakspeare made a greater venture than ever; he purchased the lease of some unexpired tithes for £440; and I do not doubt it was an excellent bargain. Two family events took place in 1607; his daughter Susanna married a Stratford physician named John Hall, and his brother Edmund, an actor in London, died at the early age of twenty-seven. The following year his mother died, and shortly before her death Shakspeare was a grandfather at forty-four years of age, his daughter Susanna having given birth to a child named Elizabeth,—the only grandchild he lived to see. Some time between 1610 and 1612 he left London for ever, to realise the dream of his life, and settle down in his native village after the toils of so many years. But his well-deserved rest was not to be of long duration. Our last date in this history is 1616. Early in that year his daughter Judith married a son of the Mr. Quiney who

borrowed the £30. On February 25th Shakspeare made his will, and his death took place April 23rd. The tragedy and triumph of Shakspeare's life always seem to me to be summed up in that sublime sonnet, his pæan of victory over mutability and death.

Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth,
Starved by these rebel powers that thee array,
Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth,
Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?
Why so large cost, having so short a lease,
Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?
Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,
Eat up thy charge? is this thy body's end?
Then, soul, live thou upon thy servant's loss,
And let that pine to aggravate thy store;
Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;
Within be fed, without be rich no more:
So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,
And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.

Studies of Some of Shakspeare's Plays.

I.

MACBETH.

'They that are in sin are also in the punishment of sin.'

SWEDENBORG.

[This play was probably written about the year 1606, when Shakspeare was forty-two years of age, and belongs to his Third Period. The lines describing Macbeth's vision,

Some I see
That twofold balls and treble sceptres carry,

are supposed to have reference to the accession of James I., King of England and Scotland. The 'twofold balls' refer to the king's two coronations, and the 'treble sceptres' to the three kingdoms over which he ruled. James ascended the throne of England in 1603; we know that *Macbeth* was acted in the Globe Theatre in 1610; so that the production of the play must have been between these dates, and internal evidence seems to lead to the opinion that Shakspeare wrote it about 1606.]

I. THE SEEDS OF SIN.

IN *Macbeth* we have a terrible story of sin and its consequences; we mark the downward career of two souls into moral disruption and ruin.

And yet who could have anticipated such an issue for these two lives? Macbeth was a dauntless soldier, a loyal subject and a chivalrous gentleman. Before he appears on the stage we have brilliant accounts of his exploits on the field of battle. King Duncan receives reports of the overthrow of a rebel army; first a Captain and then Ross bring glowing tidings of Macbeth's unexampled courage. They call him 'brave Macbeth,' 'valour's minion,' and describe him as 'that Bellona's bridegroom, lapped in proof.' When Duncan meets him he is perplexed to find honours worthy enough to be bestowed on so great a man, and cries :—

O worthiest cousin !

The sin of my ingratitude even now
Was heavy on me : Thou art so far before
That swiftest wing of recompense is slow
To overtake thee. Would thou had less deserv'd ;
That the proportion both of thanks and payment
Might have been mine ! only I have left to say,
More is thy due than more than all can pay.

Lady Macbeth was a sweet, courteous, gracious lady, absorbed in loving pride of her husband, thinking no honour too great for him to wear, no deed too difficult for his valour to achieve. This man and wife seemed destined for a career most brilliant and honourable. Her strength of will embodied in his valorous action, there seemed no summit of ambition to which they might not win their way. *No summit of ambition to which they might not win their way*,—that was the thought which so worked upon their minds as at last to plunge them into ruin. In her passionate love Lady Macbeth resolved that she would use her life, and strain every fibre of her being to crown her husband with the highest honour earth could give.

Why should he not some day be King of Scotland? That

was the shape into which ambition crystallised, until she was dominated by that one conception : it fascinated her imagination, it polarised her will, and convulsed her moral nature into helpless paralysis. The golden crown to which she aspired so dazzled her eyes that sanctions of moral conduct gradually faded from her vision. What a splendid monarch would her brave husband make ! How much better would the crown become his brow, than that of the saintly Duncan, more fit to be a hermit in a quiet cell than a king upon the throne of a warlike land !

And, at first, it seemed as though there was nothing extravagant or disloyal in this far-reaching hope. Duncan was an old man, and Macbeth was his near kinsman. The two sons of the king were but young, the country had of late been harassed by foreign foes and internal treasons ; and what was more probable than that, when the old king died, the valiant and victorious general should be elected to the vacant throne ? These were the hopes they indulged ; over and over again had they discussed the contingencies of the future ; until the woman's whole nature became concentrated in one over-mastering determination ; religion, morality, loyalty gradually sank away before that one purpose which absorbed her will. Lady Macbeth was destined to be a great woman, greatly good or greatly bad. With that enormous strength of will, that devoted love and desperate ambition, she must either rise to some height of noble self-sacrifice, or sink into some depth of miserable ruin.

2. THE WITCHES.

BEFORE the play commences, Macbeth has gone from home to fight against the enemies of his king. He has fought with a valour which has swept the rebel army from the field like chaff from a threshing-floor. He is returning

flushed with victory. He has never before been so conscious of his own strength. What his wife has so often whispered to him must be true,—that no destiny is too high for him to reach. We all know something of the nervous excitement that follows a great success. We enter on an enterprise with brave courage and yet with many doubts; it is an engagement which may result in failure; no one can be quite certain of the issue. But we succeed, succeed beyond all our anticipations; and then, for a time, our brain glows, our mind flashes into a kind of supernatural flame, and our soul is intoxicated with the new wine of triumphant joy. Now, Macbeth is coming home from war intoxicated with success. He is one of those men of powerful imagination, who are swayed by the visions of the mind, until the over-mastering thoughts project themselves into the senses, and are reflected back from the senses upon the soul as objects of heavenly beauty or diabolical terror. With this clairvoyant tendency, in that hour of unnatural excitement, Macbeth, for the first time, meets those forms of evil which ensnare him by their promises, and lure him to destruction by their lying wonders.

Macbeth sees them for the first time, but Shakspeare has shown them to us before, when they met together to plot the destruction of their victim. It is with consummate skill that the poet opens the tragedy with the following passage, which contains a complete scene.

*A Desert Place. Thunder and Lightning.
Enter three Witches.*

1 *Witch.* When shall we three meet again,
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

2 *Witch.* When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

- 3 *Witch.* That will be ere the set of sun.
 1 *Witch.* Where the place ?
 2 *Witch.* Upon the heath.
 3 *Witch.* There to meet with Macbeth.
 1 *Witch.* I come, Graymalkin !
 2 *Witch.* Paddock calls.
 3 *Witch.* Anon.
All. Fair is foul, and foul is fair :
 Hover through the fog and filthy air.
 [Witches *vanish*.]

It is, then, by no accident that Macbeth finds the witches upon the heath ; and the effect is heightened, when the first words we hear him speak are an echo of their confused chorus. As Macbeth and Banquo approach the haunted spot, the former says :—

So foul and fair a day I have not seen ;

and, in a moment, with that response to their chorus, the witches burst upon the gaze of the astonished warriors.

Those frightful witches, with their unclean ritual of sin, strike, as Coleridge says, the keynote at the very opening of the play. What is the inmost nature of those secret thoughts which have taken possession of Macbeth's soul ? *There* see them in their naked deformity and repulsive ugliness ; in those three Weird Sisters he has a revelation of the demoniacal emotions which are governing his will. In the world of mind *thoughts are things*. Indeed the profoundest philosophy teaches that thoughts alone are real, and things are only the shadows and reflections which follow in their train. This solid-seeming world is the embodied thought of God. God *thinks*, and Nature *is*. The laws of the universe are the living Word proceeding from a Divine Mind, and apart from that Eternal Thought, the world, as Shakspeare himself says, would 'dissolve, and

like an unsubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind.' And, in his measure, man is like God, the creator of his own moral and intellectual world. Think a thought long enough, deeply enough, and that thought shall become your fate; it shall breathe in your words, participate in your actions, saturate your atmosphere, construct your world into its own likeness, and create for you a heaven of purity or a hell of darkness. A man's character is constituted by his thoughts. 'As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.'

In this way we can understand how these unclean hags, round their bubbling cauldron, with their lying promises and juggling words, are the *dramatic representation* of the evil suggestions whispering in the mind of Macbeth and the guilty emotions seething in his soul. But they are more than this. If Macbeth alone had seen the witches, we might have regarded them as merely the vision raised by his excited imagination and eager thought, as the sensuous emphasis of his strong feelings. But Macbeth has a companion, his fellow-soldier, Banquo; and Banquo also sees the witches. Later on in the play, when the ghost of Banquo appears at the banquet, no one can see the spectre except Macbeth, and we readily conclude it is the creation of a deranged mind. So that Shakspere evidently wishes us to regard these witches as more than the ecstasy of an excited mind; he seems to tell us that they represent some objective power of evil which haunts the paths of men. The power of evil is not confined to the soul of man; the universe is pervaded by moral influence, so that there is not a scene or event which does not touch some spring of sin or goodness. The moral strife within our own personality is the microcosm of a great strife throughout nature. What the apostle calls the 'mystery of iniquity' works around us as well as within us. There is a conflict, a

wrestle in whose issue all things are involved. There are impulses to evil, which come like a flood, which take us by surprise, against which we have to oppose ourselves as against an alien power which would storm the citadel of our being. Thoughts rise from hidden depths from which we shrink; suggestions come which make us tremble 'like guilty things surprised.' We begin to learn the wisdom of that prayer, 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil' (the evil power in the world which would subdue the soul to itself). And, to explain this phenomenon of the moral world, men have believed in fallen angels, in a prince of the power of the air, in rulers of darkness, and in demoniacal possessions, whereby evil spirits entered into helpless souls, and held them captive to their hateful will. Now, Shakspeare does not give any theological interpretation of all this; but he does give the fact with terrible emphasis. Both Macbeth and Banquo see the witches. Good men as well as bad are spectators of the terrors of life, and recognise the warfare of spiritual powers. No man, however stainless in character, can pass through a world like this without shuddering at the evil influences which sometimes sweep over men's souls, just as some deadly plague will infect their bodies with disease and death.

We notice that Banquo does all he can to resist the unclean influence. He tells the witches that he neither begs nor fears their favour nor their hate; and he warns Macbeth that,

oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us to honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.

And on the night of Duncan's murder, when he is oppressed

by the dreadful suspicions which seem to make the air hang heavy and to stain heaven with darkness, he cries :—

Merciful powers,
 Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature
 Gives way to in repose.

Banquo seeks to win the merciful powers of goodness to his side for protection against even a thought of evil. But Macbeth becomes a fellow-worker with the powers of darkness; he gathers encouragement from the discovery that there is a current of demoniacal influence working on his side. The witches speak his secret thought; their words are the echo of the whisperings of his own ambition :—

All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!
 All hail, Macbeth! *thou shalt be King hereafter.*

The witches have no sooner vanished than messengers arrive from the king announcing Macbeth's creation as thane of Cawdor, and this startling fulfilment fires his old ambition of kingship. Already in thought he is a murderer; he wishes Duncan dead, and it is a short transition from the will to the deed. 'He that hateth his brother is a murderer.' These are the thoughts passing through the mind of Macbeth as he receives the new honour bestowed by Duncan :—

This supernatural soliciting
 Cannot be ill, cannot be good : If ill,
 Why hath it given me earnest of success,
 Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor :
 If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
 Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
 And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
 Against the use of nature? Present fears
 Are less than horrible imaginings :

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is,
But what is not.

His evil thoughts are struggling to shape themselves into deeds; and the turmoil of his soul becomes so intolerable, that for a time he tries to put aside any final decision as to the course of action to be employed. He has become thane of Cawdor without seeking the title, so perhaps some unexpected event will crown him king. He is in the hands of mysterious powers, who may work their will upon him:—

If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me,
Without my stir.

He tries to think he is the creature of a Fate compelling him to a certain destiny, but he forgets that he is his own fate in listening so compliantly to the witches' words, and pondering so eagerly how their prophecies may be fulfilled. Every cherished desire of his heart decides his place in the ranks of the army of darkness; he is only a victim of the powers of evil because he has yielded himself up as their servant. And, in consequence, when Duncan invests his son Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland and heir to the throne, Macbeth no longer leaves the future to chance, but becomes resolute to co-operate with 'Fate and meta-physical aid' to secure the crown. As he leaves the King to hasten to his wife at the Castle, these are the dreadful thoughts which fill his mind:—

The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o'er-leap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires:
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

Knowing as we do these murderous designs, it is horrible to hear the unsuspecting King extol Macbeth's goodness, and resolve to hasten to the Castle where such a terrible death awaits him :—

Let's after him,
Whose care is gone before to bid us welcome :
It is a peerless kinsman.

Duncan little imagined how much truth there was in the words he had spoken only a few moments before :—

There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face.

3. THE CRIME.

THE rest of the story tells how Macbeth was swept along by the powers of evil to which he had allied himself. The witches only appear visibly now and then. But their presence soaks and stains every scene in the fateful play. The atmosphere is heavy with the poison of their breath ; they hang in the darkness, and descend in the cloud ; they guide their victim by the spectral dagger ; they infatuate him by ambiguous promises, which, like will-o'-the-wisps, lure him to the precipice over which he falls into outer darkness.

These powers of evil have a most potent helpmeet in his wife. I scarcely know how it is, but I always think of this bad woman not so much with loathing as with pity. I do not think she was a great, dark, bloodthirsty fury. She was, I doubt not, a slight-made woman, with blue eyes flashing with the electric will that charged them ; with slender white hand that had only known the perfumes of Arabia. She held sacred the memory of her father lying grey-haired upon a peaceful bed of death. If it had not

been for that memory she thought she could have murdered Duncan with her own hand :—

Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done't.

With unflinching passion she had given herself in marriage to the man who had won her heart. Upon her breast she had nursed a helpless child, and, doubtless, had been a most devoted mother. But, with indomitable strength of will, whatever thought took strong hold of her, it must sooner or later become embodied in a deed. Macbeth's clairvoyant imagination projected ghosts; Lady Macbeth's impetuous will created deeds. She saw the end before her, and swept away all hindrances to achieve her purpose. And to her ambition there comes a terrible temptation, a fatal opportunity. Part of the witches' prophecy is immediately fulfilled, for Duncan, as he meets the victorious general, creates him thane of Cawdor. Macbeth sends a letter to his wife telling her of this, and also of the unfulfilled promise that he shall be king hereafter. At her first appearance in the play she is reading portions of this letter.

They met me in the day of success; and I have learned by the perfectest report, they have more in them than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanished. Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it, came missives from the king, who all-hailed me, Thane of Cawdor; by which title, before, these weird sisters saluted me, and referred me to the coming on of time, with, Hail, king that shalt be! This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou mightst not lose the dues of rejoicing, by being ignorant of what greatness is promised thee. Lay it to thy heart, and farewell.

Then she ponders over these wonderful tidings in the following important passage, which brings out the strong contrast between the characters of the husband and wife :—

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor ; and shalt be
 What thou art promis'd : yet do I fear thy nature ;
 It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
 To catch the nearest way : thou wouldst be great ;
 Art not without ambition, but without
 The illness should attend it : what thou wouldst highly,
 That wouldst thou holily ; wouldst not play false,
 And yet wouldst wrongly win : thou'dst have, great Glamis,
 That which cries, *Thus thou must do, if thou have it ;*
And that which rather thou dost fear to do
Than wishest should be undone. Hie thee hither,
 That I may pour my spirits in thine ear ;
 And chastise with the valour of my tongue
 All that impedes thee from the golden round,
 Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
 To have thee crowned withal.

As she reads and ponders the startling news, and is straining her mind to think how she can rouse her husband to secure the crown, there comes a messenger to say that, on that very night, the King will be her guest, and will sleep in the Castle of Macbeth. For the moment she is taken off her guard, and answers the servant with the cry :—

Thou'rt mad to say it.

But soon she recovers her self-possession, and in an instant it is settled beyond the possibility of change. The opportunity is come, and at all costs she will seize it ; she will forget her womanhood and stifle her pity ; she will fill her whole nature with direst cruelty, that she may reach her hand to the golden prize which is the utmost goal of her ambition. As soon as the servant is gone and she is again

alone, she begins to brace herself up for her dreadful purpose, and it is appalling to hear the gentle lady raise such a prayer as this :—

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty ! make thick my blood ;
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it ! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief ! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, *Hold, hold !*

It is easy to misread the significance of this passage in its bearing on Lady Macbeth's character. The very violence which she does to her womanhood, the strain which she has to put upon her nature, tells us that she is not an unnatural fury or a bloodthirsty monster. That is the secret of the sympathy we are compelled to feel with this wicked woman. Read this play aright, and you feel the tragedy most deeply, because this criminal is all the time a WOMAN, with a woman's heart beating in her breast, however she may try to smother her pity, and stifle the compunctious visitings of nature. Lady Macbeth was not an incarnate fiend, but a bad, ambitious woman ; and Shakspeare never allows her to be swept beyond those limits of human nature, within which we are compelled to regard her as one subject to like passions as we are.

And if it is through his wife that Macbeth is encouraged to commit the crime, yet he himself is ready to yield to the

fatal opportunity. His hesitation only arises from regard for consequences, not from reverence for higher law. Before Duncan retires to rest, Macbeth shrinks from the contemplated crime; and his thoughts are revealed to us in the following passage :—

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly : if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success ; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But, in these cases
We still have judgment here ; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague the inventor : this even-handed justice
Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips. He's here in double trust ;
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed ; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off ;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other.

The thought of Duncan's goodness does not rouse his pity, but only makes him think how the victim's virtues will make his crime appear the blacker. He is only afraid lest his

crime be discovered. He thinks how terrible it will be to stand before the world a blood-stained criminal. He does not so much shrink from murder as from conviction as a murderer. He is not afraid of sin, but only of the punishment. He deliberately says that he would risk what the next world might bring, 'would jump the life to come,' if only he could be sure that in this world no judgment would overtake him.

While he is calculating consequences, his wife enters, and he tells her that he cannot bring himself to do the deed ; at which she pours indignant scorn upon him as a coward for not daring to use the means to gain the object of his desires. To her impulsive nature the act and desire are one, and she cannot understand the weakness which checks the wish from instantly issuing in the deed :—

Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour,
As thou art in desire ? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting *I dare not* wait upon *I would*,
Like the poor cat i' the adage ?

Then, with instant penetration, seeing what it is that will not allow her husband to 'screw his courage to the sticking point,' she explains how Duncan can be murdered while his chamberlains are sunk in drunken sleep, and when the crime is discovered in the morning the guards will at once be accused, as they are arrested with blood-stains on their hands and daggers, while Macbeth and his wife will never be suspected, as they 'make their griefs and clamour roar upon his death.' That decides Macbeth ; if there is no danger of discovery he is ready for the greatest crime ; and the first act closes with his resolution :—

I am settled, and bend up
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.
Away, and mock the time with fairest show :
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.

This is a striking instance of how worldly prudence and fear of punishment are too weak to protect the soul, when the enemy comes in like a flood. Nothing but unconditional reverence for divine law can save a man from temptations of ambition, lust and gain. When the gold is bright, the need strong, and the chance of conviction small, do you think a man can save himself by quoting some prudential maxim about honesty being the best policy? As well could you have restrained Macbeth by reminding him of the old tradition that 'Murder will out' and 'Blood will have blood.' And so before his wife's urgent words, prudence, forethought of consequences, pity and loyalty are swept away.

The deed is done ; two souls are lost ; wife and husband feel themselves alone, shut out from human sympathy, with that dreadful secret burning in their brains, and that blood seeming for ever to stain their hands.

4. THE HARVEST OF SIN.

AFTER the morning of the crime we do not see Lady Macbeth until the day of the coronation banquet. And how great is the change ! Since the night of Duncan's murder this man and woman have lived together in hell. Surrounded by suspicion they have eaten their meat in fear ; sleep has deserted them, or if it has come it has only brought the affliction of terrible dreams which shake them nightly. Lady Macbeth comes in on the morning before the feast, and at first she is alone. She is queen ; her husband wears the crown which she has violated her

womanhood to secure. She thought it was worth it all. Now listen to the agony of her thoughts, and learn that, after all, this is not a furious virago or raging Amazon, but a real woman. She is talking to herself:—

Naught's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content :
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.

This wretched woman has strung up her nature to do a dreadful deed, and now the strain makes her ache in every fibre of her being. Her husband seems sometimes to be going mad; he wanders in solitude with wild looks; in company he is always starting and muttering; and she is in constant anxiety lest he should let out the dreadful secret. At night-time she can do nothing but watch over him in terror; he hears voices and sees visions, and sighs and shudders as though he would rend his bulk. It is all she can do to try to comfort him, to try to chase away monstrous thoughts and fearful imaginings. She feels the task is becoming too much for her. She besought the powers of darkness to unsex her; but now she finds that, after all, she is a woman—a woman too frail to bear such a burden and endure such a task. She rose into the strength of crime, and now she falls into an abyss of weakness and remorse. She has crowned her husband, but the brain beneath the crown is like the witches' cauldron, seething and bubbling with horrors without a name. The man she loved and worshipped, for whom she desecrated her womanhood and stained her soul, is a miserable ruin, haunted by ghosts, tormented by spectres, tired of life, envying the victim he sent to the grave:—

Better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our place, have sent to peace,

Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever *he* sleeps well;
Treason has done his worst: nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing
Can touch *him* further.

In the scene of the coronation feast (Act III., sc. 4), Lady Macbeth tries, with broken heart, to keep her husband quiet when he stands shuddering at the ghost of Banquo, in danger of letting out his crimes before the assembled court. Poor, wretched woman, how calm she tries to be; how she expostulates with the haunted man; how she tries to explain matters to the astonished guests! At last she entreats the company to withdraw, and, alone with her miserable husband, sinks into an utter relapse of weakness, silence and despair. So full of resource before her guests, now she has only strength to gasp out those brief answers to Macbeth's wild and bloody talk. As we read this scene, we must imagine how Macbeth rages like an angry wild beast, and intoxicates his mind with thoughts of revenge and blood, while his exhausted wife sinks into a chair, and feebly replies to the strange utterances she can only partially understand.

Macb. It will have blood; they say, blood will have blood:
Stones have been known to move and trees to speak;
Augurs and understood relations have
By magot-pies and choughs and rooks brought forth
The secret'st man of blood. What is the night?

Lady M. Almost at odds with morning, which is which.

Macb. How say'st thou, that Macduff denies his person
At our great bidding?

Lady M. Did you send to him, sir?

Macb. I hear it by the way; but I will send:
There's not a one of them, but in his house

I keep a servant fee'd. I will to-morrow,
And betimes I will, to the weird sisters :
More shall they speak ; for now I am bent to know,
By the worst means, the worst. For mine own good,
All causes shall give way : I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er :
Strange things I have in head, that will to hand ;
Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd.

Lady M. You lack the season of all natures, sleep.

Macb. Come, we'll to sleep. My strange and self-abuse
Is the initiate fear that wants hard use :
We are yet but young in deed.

Macbeth's madness only makes him wade deeper in blood, one murder leading to another, until the nation becomes weary of such a monstrous king. He murders Banquo, because the witches promised that his posterity should reign in Scotland ; and he slaughters the wife and children of Macduff because that nobleman has fled to England. There is an exquisite picture of Macduff's brave little son when the murderers attack the castle at Fife (Act IV., sc. 2) ; his clever prattle with his mother, and his loving thought for her safety when he finds he is being murdered, make him one of the most fascinating of the children in Shakspeare's plays. And for pure pathos there are few passages to surpass the scene where Ross has arrived in England, and, in the presence of Malcolm, tells Macduff that all his family has been slaughtered. The agony of the husband and father is impressively brought out in the entreaty of Malcolm, which is italicised ; and how pathetic is the cry, 'He has no children !'

Ross. Your castle is surprised ; your wife and babes
Savagely slaughter'd : to relate the manner,

Were, on the quarry of these murder'd deer,
To add the death of you.

Mal. Merciful Heaven !

*What, man ! ne'er pull your hat upon your brows ;
Give sorrow words : the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break.*

Macd. My children too ?

Ross. Wife, children, servants, all
That could be found.

Macd. And I must be from thence !
My wife kill'd too ?

Ross. I have said.

Mal. Be comforted :
Let's make us medicines of our great revenge,
To cure this deadly grief.

Macd. He has no children. All my pretty ones ?
Did you say all ? O hell-kite ! All ?
What, all my pretty chickens, and their dam
At one fell swoop ?

Mal. Dispute it like a man.

Macd. I shall do so ;
But I must also feel it as a man :
I cannot but remember such things were,
That were most precious to me. Did heaven look on,
And would not take their part ? Sinful Macduff,
They were all struck for thee ! naught that I am,
Not for their own demerits, but for mine,
Fell slaughter on their souls. Heaven rest them now !

Dreadful is the punishment which descends on the author of all these woes. He cannot sleep ; he dares not think ; his evil imaginings project themselves into hideous visions. For him there is no retreat ; he is caught within a network of evil agencies from which there is no escape. He goes again to the witches, and in a series of visions he is encouraged to continue his course of iniquity. He is promised that he can never be killed by any man of woman born, and that he

shall never vanquished be, until
Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him.

The sequel shows how these lying promises were only made to lure the superstitious man to destruction ; and in the end Macbeth finds he has been fooled by ‘juggling fiends,’

That palter with us in a double sense ;
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope.

This man has yielded himself up a victim to the powers of evil ; he has shut himself out from every thought of God ; he has deliberately despised the warnings of punishment ; without God and without hope repentance is impossible ; he rushes recklessly from crime to crime ; and, with a curse upon the juggling fiends who have lured him to his ruin, he is slain upon the field of battle.

But where have we ever met a more appalling description of the penalty of sin than in the night-scene where we look on Lady Macbeth for the last time ? This is the unutterable anguish of a lost soul racked by the memory of its sin. Well, indeed, did the great theologian say, ‘He that is in sin is in the punishment of sin.’ Dante never drew a more heartrending picture of purgatory or hell than this of the wretched woman, wandering in somnambulism through her palace, horrified at the thought of the crime into which she had plunged so boldly, re-enacting the murder of that dreadful night, oppressed by the smell of blood which pollutes her sense, washing her hands again and again, but all in vain, because the stain has gone too deep for any outward water to cleanse away. How boldly she once came from Duncan’s chamber, held out her bloody hands to her terrified husband, and cried :—

My hands are of your colour :

* * * *

A little water clears us of this deed :

How easy is it then !

And now her cry of agony is this :—

Out, damned spot ! out, I say !

* * * *

Here's the smell of blood still : all the perfumes of Arabia will
not sweeten this little hand. Oh ! oh ! oh !

When the physician brings the sad report of her condition,
Macbeth replies, as he buckles on his armour for the final
struggle :—

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain
And, with some sweet oblivious antidote,
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart ?

And when he hears of her death, he has not time to grieve
for the loss of his devoted wife ; he is preparing to meet
the onset of his foes, and can only answer :—

She should have died hereafter ;
There would have been a time for such a word.
To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle !
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more : it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

And so she passes away amidst the ruin of all the hopes for which she has sacrificed her soul.

This woman has opposed herself to the vast machinery of the moral government of the world, and it has proved too strong for her; she has tried to make her will supreme against the everlasting laws of God, and now her proud will sinks into feebleness and ruin. She thought she had swept away every impulse of conscience and pity, and now the tidal wave of natural emotion comes rolling back in a frightful recoil of terror and remorse.

And *because* she breaks beneath the penalty of the laws she has defied, we take leave of her with profound pity, and even with some ray of hope. She thought she was unsexed, but she knew not the depths of her own nature. Her strength of crime was only an abnormal strain which shook and exhausted her soul, and now her womanhood is left in abject weakness of anguish and horror. And so, while our minds are appalled by this dark story, we learn how the poet maintains the supremacy of the moral law, and shows us that sin is always a cheat, a failure and a dire catastrophe. Sooner or later the eternal righteousness will vindicate itself against the powers of evil, and in that vindication will execute an inevitable judgment upon rebellious wills that have lifted themselves against the majesty of divine law. Sin never succeeds, for it fights against the Divine Necessity which creates and sustains the fabric of the universe. To its minutest atom the universe is moral, polarised by divinity, and pledged to a spiritual purpose. The oath of God has fated the laws of the world and the nature of man to make an end of sin and bring in an everlasting righteousness.

II.

KING LEAR.

' Here Love the slain with Love the slayer lies ;
Deep drowned are both 'in the same sunless pool.
Up from its depths that mirror thundering skies
Bubbles the wan mirth of the mirthless Fool.'

W. W.

[This play was probably written about the year 1604, and belongs to Shakspeare's Third Period. The story is adopted from Holinshed, but with great changes ; in the original story the enemies of Lear are conquered, and the old king is restored to his throne.]

THE play of *King Lear* has been compared to a Gothic cathedral, with gloomy crypts and ascending spires, with mysterious depths of roof and pillared aisles in dim perspective, with glowing pictures of martyred saints and monstrous gargoyles of frightful demons. This play is, indeed, a strange, vast, wonderful creation, difficult for the mind to grasp in its complete uniqueness, bewildering our imagination by its infinite variety of aspect and intricacy of detail. *King Lear* is one of the greatest creations of human intellect, surpassing, in primitive strength and strenuous vitality, the finest works of art which have ever been built in stone, carved in marble, or painted on canvas. Here Shakspeare explores human nature, strips it bare of its accidents, exposes its innermost workings, reveals the secret things of wickedness and the exhaustless resources of goodness.

I. THE TRIAL OF LOVE.

COMPARING the whole play to a Gothic cathedral, we may say that it receives its consecration from the shrine of one beautiful saint. Whenever we recall these tumultuous scenes of guilt and madness, there always rises the calm vision of Cordelia, the genius of truth and love, whose cruel banishment begins the story, and whose sacrificial death completes and crowns the tragedy. At the opening of the play, Lear is an old man of eighty years, with deep affection, powerful intellect and strong self-will. As far as we can gather, he has been a worthy monarch; certainly he has won to himself the love and loyalty of the best and purest who surround his throne. There must have been fine qualities in this king who secured not only the devotion of his daughter Cordelia, but also the stoical loyalty of Kent and the unquestioning faithfulness of the Fool. But many years of absolute power have worked their influence into his character. Always passionate, wayward and domineering, in his old age he becomes jealous, exacting and capricious. Out of this deterioration of character the currents of tragic events arise. He has no son on whom his kingship can devolve, and he wishes to see the country settled under a new government before his death. So he devises a scheme by which his three daughters and their husbands shall divide the kingdom. In his overbearing egoism, Lear gloats over the thought of how he will be praised for his unbounded generosity; and he looks forward to spending his last days as an honoured guest in his daughters' homes, envired by their filial care and love. Without the burdens of office he will still hold the title, dignity and reverence of a king. This partition of his kingdom is not the symptom of a better spirit of renunciation, but rather an exaggeration of supreme self-will. He glories in his own

power to bestow such immense benefits ; he flatters himself with the thought of the exuberant gratitude which must crown him for such acts of grace. This political scheme is finally drawn out ; but its enactment must be accompanied by fussy, formal verbosity, which shall feed the insatiable egoism of the headstrong king. He makes his three daughters appear before him at court, and tells all that he intends to do. And then, in a sudden freak of capricious temper, he tries to bribe them to confess how much they love their father ; and he gives them a hint that the size of their possessions will be measured by the bigness of their words.

These are his words :—

Tell me, my daughters,—
Since now we will divest us, both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state,—
Which of you shall we say doth love us most ?
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge.

At the moment, this may, perhaps, have been done more in jest than in earnest, to enliven a solemn act of diplomacy by a sort of household conference. But, no doubt, the real secret of it all was the old man's jealousy, his greediness of praise, his delight to have his ears tickled by outward protestations of loyalty. With his two eldest daughters he succeeds : he gets exactly what he asks. In words of fulsome flattery, Goneril and Regan protest their entire devotion to the king. And they 'have their reward ;' both of them are given their dowers of shares in the kingdom, to remain an inheritance to their children after them.

Meanwhile, the youngest daughter stands in grieved astonishment, looks and listens. Before Cordelia speaks

a word, Shakspeare lets us hear her think. Twice we are let into her secret feelings, before an open word escapes her lips; as though the poet would say to us, at the very beginning: *This dear maiden thinks and feels more than she can ever express in words; her brave heart is stored with emotions, which wait for deeds to unfold their hidden strength.* Shakspeare lets us hear her think before she speaks, in order that we may not too harshly judge the abruptness of her answer to her father's demand. As General pours out her shallow protestations, Cordelia shrinks in instinctive repulsion, and thinks to herself:—

What shall Cordelia do? love and be silent.

And when Regan tries to overtop her sister's pile of flatteries, she thinks again:—

Then poor Cordelia!

And yet not so; since, I am sure, my love's
More richer than my tongue.

This vain, headstrong man is delighted with the success of his device; but the best, he thinks, is yet to come. His favourite daughter has yet to speak, and he thinks her soft and gentle words will be more welcome than the verbose rhetoric of her sisters. Later on in the play he says of Cordelia:—

Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman.

But he little knows the purity of Cordelia's heart, or he would never have profaned it by offering a vulgar bribe. The King of France and the Duke of Burgundy are both at court suing for her hand; and turning to her with a smile, he asks:—

Now, our joy,
Although the last, not least ; to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interest'd ; what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters ? Speak.

And he listens to catch the sweetest sounds to which he can attend, the utterance of his dearest daughter's love. He asks her what she can say to draw from him the largest gift, and she answers :—

Nothing, my lord.

Instantly the father starts in amazement, and a thrill of wonder passes through the court. That single word from the gentle maiden's lips in a moment precipitates a freakish jest into deadly earnest.

Nothing !

cries the astonished king.

Nothing,

firmly replies Cordelia. The father's brow is clouded ; he clutches the arms of his throne to repress his growing passion ; he leans forward, and gasps out :—

Nothing will come of nothing ; speak again.

Poor Cordelia is grieved to disobey her dear father, or seem indifferent to his love ; but the thing demanded is impossible ; she simply CANNOT violate the most sacred sanctions of her nature. She has been struck dumb by the loathsome sycophancy of her sisters ; and she feels as though she would choke if she dared to speak words of love in an atmosphere poisoned by bribery, flattery and deceit. I

can fancy how she wrings her hands in her distress, and tries to crush down the pain she feels, as she answers :—

Unhappy that I am, I *cannot* heave
My heart into my mouth.

Then we all know how the headstrong king bursts into furious passion, and banishes his favourite daughter for ever from his sight.

The Duke of Kent, the most faithful servant of Lear, does all he can to moderate his rage ; but the king only answers that it is his very love that has turned to hate :—

Peace, Kent !
Come not between the dragon and his wrath.
I loved her most, and thought to set my rest
On her kind nursery.

Kent still bravely expostulates with the king, entreating him as one

Whom I have ever honour'd as my king,
Loved as my father, as my master follow'd,
As my great patron thought on in my prayers.

When he is threatened with vengeance, with splendid courage he answers :—

Be Kent unmannerly,
When Lear is mad. What wilt thou do, old man ?
Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak,
When power to flattery bows ? To plainness honour's
bound,
When majesty stoops to folly. Reverse thy doom ;
And, in thy best consideration, check
This hideous rashness : answer my life my judgment,
Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least :
Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sound
Reverbs no hollowness.

This plain speaking incenses Lear to the utmost, and he pronounces exile on the duke, with sentence of death if he is found in the kingdom six days hence ; and Kent leaves the court with this blessing on Cordelia :—

The gods to their dear shelter take thee, maid,
That justly think'st, and hast most rightly said !

When he hears of Cordelia's banishment, the King of France demands to know of what dreadful crime she can be guilty, and the maiden herself makes the appeal to her father to vindicate her character :—

I yet beseech your majesty,—
If for I want that glib and oily art,
To speak and purpose not ; since what I well intend,
I'll do't before I speak,—that you make known
It is no vicious blot, murder, or foulness,
No unchaste action, or dishonour'd step,
That hath deprived me of your grace and favour ;
But even for want of that for which I am richer,
A still-soliciting eye, and such a tongue
As I am glad I have not, though not to have it
Hath lost me in your liking.

This entreaty deepens the love and admiration of the King of France ; he can only discover in her conduct

a tardiness in nature
Which often leaves the history unspoke
That it intends to do.

In words that touch the vital truth of the whole matter he declares that

love's not love
When it is mingled with regards that stand
Aloof from the entire point ;

and he thinks himself rich as he makes so noble a lady his wife, even though she comes to him poor, forsaken and despised.

In spite of her vindication from the lips of Kent and France, some critics think Cordelia was to blame in this abrupt reply to her father's demand. But, I think, Shakespeare wants to make us know that there are some things which even a father has no right to compel—things which *cannot* be forced, or bribed, or bought. When we listen in company to conventional talk about sacred things, in the midst of vulgar cant and wordy pietism, we are compelled to close our lips in silence; and we feel it better to be thought 'infidels' than desecrate the sanctities of religion by empty phrases of which the heart knows nothing. Sometimes, when you will persist to bother a sincere child as to how much he loves you, you almost admire the impatient evasion by which he protects himself, and ends your tiresome questions, as he cries, 'I don't love you a bit!' If that is a lie, you are far more to blame than the child.* A true character will not be compelled, but yields at once to the tender invitation, 'My son, give me thy heart.' How profoundly are we taught the inviolability of the soul in that wonderful picture of the Divine Christ standing at the door and waiting for admission. 'Behold,' He says, 'I stand at the door and knock.' Surely the Lord of souls has power and right to enter every door and take possession of every heart. And yet He regards the human will as too sacred to be compelled by force from without, and waits in unwearied patience until the barrier is removed from within. In this play we have a despotic parent trying to take his child's heart by storm. And if Cordelia's conduct seems undutiful, her tyrannical father must bear

* Compare Wordsworth's poem called *Anecdote for Fathers*.

the blame. There are times when we have to guard ourselves from the unwarranted pressure of outward force upon the sanctuary of the soul. We have no right to encroach upon another's personality, or compel the lifting of the veil which has been drawn to shut out curious, prying eyes.

A modern English poet truly says :—

Not to unveil before the gaze
Of an imperfect sympathy,
In aught we are, is the sweet praise
And the main sum of modesty.

Cordelia would have been false to her holiest nature, false to her deep love, if she had allowed her voice to join in a chorus of blatant lies, if she had offered her affection in exchange for the royal bribe. In Cordelia there was a beautiful remoteness, a sacred depth of silent strength. By every action of her life her father might learn something of the love she felt. But if he wanted words, she had none to give; if he offered to bribe her affection, then the windows of the soul were curtained, and the door was shut to guard the sanctities of love.

Was this treatment of her father a fault in Cordelia? Then, as I compare her with her sisters, I love her for her fault! Without that 'fault' her father would never have discovered her radiant sincerity of mind, her matchless strength of love, her power of glorious self-sacrifice. Ah! but (some critic objects) how differently the course of this story might have been, if Cordelia had only been more compliant; how much suffering she might have saved by humouring her father. But you can purchase immunity from suffering at too dear a rate. Only one tiny pinch of incense on Cæsar's altar, and the Christian martyr would have been saved a frightful death, and restored to her

pleading friends, who could not understand 'obstinacy' in so small a matter. One little lie, and Jeanie Deans would at once have secured her sister's acquittal, instead of bringing reproaches on herself, and having to undertake that dreadful journey to force a pardon from the king.

There are some things which *must not* be done whatever the risk, and ought to be resisted at any cost, even unto death; there is a chastity of mind and heart supremely precious, and not for any bribe must the soul prostitute its integrity. Rather than that Cordelia should betray her heart to tyrannical selfishness, and sell her love for convenience and commodity, it was better to risk all consequences,—better to die a martyr in the arms of her broken-hearted father, than live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy, yielding up, bit by bit, the sanctities of her womanhood to hollow conventionalities and base compliances. Life has its pangs, death has its terrors, but the worst catastrophe is the defilement and gradual disruption of moral character. 'The light of the body is the eye; if, therefore, thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light; but if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. *If, therefore, the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness.*' Insincerity of word, unfaithfulness of heart, selfishness of soul,—these are the evils against which we must guard ourselves, lest the altar-light of conscience die away; and no fear of any painful consequences must ever lead to a compromise in these supreme issues of spiritual life. 'Fear not those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do; but rather fear that Dread Power which visits every sin with its inevitable consequences in the soul.' I shall never forget how deeply I was moved the first time I read in the *Apologia pro vitâ suâ* those words of Cardinal Newman: 'It is better for the sun and moon to drop from heaven,

for the earth to fail, and for all the many millions on it to die of starvation in extremest agony, as far as temporal affliction goes, than that one soul, I will not say should be lost, but should commit one single venial sin, should tell one wilful untruth, or should steal one poor farthing without excuse.' Suffering and Death!—these are not the worst catastrophes; these can be nobly encountered and bravely borne. Better a thousand times to suffer and die, than to poison the moral nature by deceit, and blunt spiritual sensibility by prudential worldliness. }

2. GONERIL AND REGAN.

LEAR soon began to learn the beauty of the 'fault' for which he banished his youngest daughter. After that rash deed all things begin to tumble into confusion and ruin. Goneril and Regan agree with each other to treat their old father with indifference; from indifference they proceed to insult; then they reject him from their homes, and form a conspiracy against his life. It is when writhing under this ingratitude that he wonders how he could have been moved to such fury by Cordelia's 'most small fault,' and speaks those well-known words:—

How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child!

The following conversation takes place immediately after Cordelia has left with the King of France; and it is important to observe how Lear's treatment of his loving daughter and faithful friend at once begins to recoil upon him in the contempt of the two children on whom he has lavished everything:—

Gon. Sister, it is not a little I have to say of what most nearly appertains to us both. I think our father will hence to-night.

Reg. That's most certain, and with you ; next month with us.

Gon. You see how full of changes his age is ; the observation we have made of it hath not been little : he always loved our sister most ; and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.

Reg. 'Tis the infirmity of his age : yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.

Gon. The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash ; then must we look to receive from his age, not alone the imperfections of long-engrafted condition, but therewithal, the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them.

Reg. Such unconstant starts are we like to have from him as this of Kent's banishment.

Gon. There is further compliment of leave-taking between France and him. Pray you, let's hit together : if our father carry authority with such dispositions as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us.

Reg. We shall further think on't.

Gon. We must do something, and i' the heat.

Cordelia knew her sisters well when she said, 'Time shall unfold what plaited cunning hides ;' for she had no sooner spoken the words than they began to concoct schemes to circumvent their father's wishes.

If this play is like a Gothic cathedral with Cordelia for its patron saint, then Goneril and Regan are like those monstrous forms which you sometimes find looking down upon you from a cornice, or glaring in hideous deformity from the stonework of a gargyle. They are utterly bad, demoniac in their wickedness. In our last study, I said that Shakspeare never lets Lady Macbeth transgress those human limits within which she still claims our sympathy. But here he has depicted two furies in woman's form, without pity or remorse, incapable of repentance. And as we look at them, we see the vindication of Cordelia in her 'most small fault.' Rather than that she should have ranked herself, even for one

compliant moment, with these monsters of hypocrisy and vice, it was better that she should protect her soul by cold reserve and unyielding dignity, even though there should descend a torrent of disaster, to end in darkness and death. Victor Hugo says that Shakspeare takes ingratitude, and gives this monster two heads—Goneril and Regan. Sometimes I feel inclined to regard these two sisters not so much as individual women as *dramatic representations* of the powers of evil in their most hateful form. In *Macbeth* the powers of evil are symbolised by the witches, carrying on their ritual of sin around the bubbling cauldron. But as long as we do not yield to their enchantments we merely shudder and pass on; they are outside the pale of human nature; they have nothing in common with ourselves. But we notice in this play how Shakspeare entirely dismisses all the machinery of ghosts and witches; most firmly does he refuse to move one step beyond the limits of the natural. And by that repudiation of supernatural agency he intensifies the terror, the pity and the pathos. Goneril and Regan are the more terrific in their wickedness, because they bear human relations, because these incarnate fiends are daughters, sisters, wives, who outrage by their evil passions every sanctity of domestic life. They represent evil as the abnormal, inorganic element, which threatens to break every bond, to dissolve every relation, and to reduce the structure of society into a chaos of conflicting wills. Humanity is gradually being built up into a living temple of God; but there are dread agencies of denial and disruption, which in the night of sin attempt to pull into ruin all that has been reared during the day by the powers of truth and goodness. Beneath this unfinished temple there are frequent shocks of earthquake, which remind us that there are still at work those powers of darkness which, if they could attain their purpose, would shake the whole structure into hideous

and Lear's pitiful insanity is the outward symbol of the moral derangement which so long has been distracting his soul.

4. THE TRIUMPH OF LOVE.

IN the midst of these terrors of nature and these unnatural human crimes love displays its supreme power. In the wonderful character of the Fool we find a constant affection that never wavers. The very first time he is mentioned it is with a touch of tender pathos; he too had worshipped Cordelia from afar, and the light of the court seemed to have gone down in darkness since his gracious mistress was banished. In Act I., sc. 4, Lear cries, 'But where's my fool? I have not seen him this two days;' and a knight replies, 'Since my young lady's going into France, sir, the fool hath much pined away.' Ah! how that simple word stings, for the king answers, '*No more of that; I have noted it well.*' In the scenes which follow, the presence of the jester only deepens the pathos. We see him wandering with his master, braving the storm, chanting his strange songs, and bursting into surprising words of bitter irony; while the thunder rattles, the lightning flashes, and the deluge pours upon the distracted king, the fool's jangling bells and random talk and wild songs intensify the unutterable pitifulness of the awful scene. When Lear's friends are conquered at the close of the play, the jester is put to death; and we notice that even when the king is broken-hearted over the dead body of Cordelia, he has a thought for his faithful servant: '*And my poor fool is hanged!*'

Kent is one of the finest heroes in these plays; he has nothing but the instinct of faithfulness to guide him this undaunted, unwavering loyalty is his one clue through the labyrinth; his is a love which beareth all things,

endureth all things, and never faileth. When his master and dear mistress are both gone, he feels that his earthly task is over; and in answer to Albany's invitation to help him to restore the state to order, he can only answer:—

I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;
My master calls me, I must not say no.

Cordelia, the Queen of France, was informed by letter of the shameful treatment which Lear was receiving; and in the following scene we have a touching description of her reception of the news. Kent is conversing with the gentleman who was present:—

Kent. Did your letters pierce the queen to any demonstration of grief?

Gent. Ay, sir; she took them, read them in my presence;
And now and then an ample tear trill'd down
Her delicate cheek: it seem'd, she was a queen
Over her passion; who, most rebel-like,
Sought to be the king o'er her.

Kent.

Q, then it mov'd her.

Gent. Not to a rage: patience and sorrow strove
Who should express her goodliest. You have seen
Sunshine and rain at once: her smiles and tears
Were like a better way: Those happy smiles,
That play'd on her ripe lip, seem'd not to know
What guests were in her eyes; which parted thence,
As pearls from diamonds dropp'd. In brief, sorrow
Would be a rarity most beloved,
If all could so become it.

Kent.

Made she no verbal question?

Gent. 'Faith, once or twice she heav'd the name of *father*
Pantingly forth, as if it press'd her heart.

Cried, *Sisters! sisters! Shame of ladies! sisters!*

Kent! father! sisters! What, i' the storm? i' the night?

Let pity not be believ'd! There she shook

The holy water from her heavenly eyes,

And clamour moisten'd : then away she started
To deal with grief alone.

Cordelia comes with the army of France to deliver her father from his foes, and restore him to his throne. At first Lear is so overcome by 'a sovereign shame,' that he refuses to meet his daughter. But before the battle father and daughter meet, and by her healing touch, and gentle words, and loving glance, the old king is restored to reason. What divine pitifulness there is in that scene where the old man wakes from sleep, sees the face of Cordelia bending over him, and believes she is a saint in bliss looking down on him out of heaven ! He thinks he is dead and his soul bound upon a wheel of fire ; out of his agony he looks up and sees the face of Cordelia as the face of an angel. It is all a dream to him ; he is bewildered, until Cordelia's tears drop down upon him, and then he knows that all is real :—

Be your tears wet ? yes, 'faith. I pray, weep not.

'Verily, man walketh in a vain show ;' but love is real, devotion true, and tears are wet ! Happy old man ! to find himself blest by the love he cast away, and roused to real life by a rain of sacred tears. As he rises and leaves the camp, leaning on his daughter's arm, he looks up again into her face to assure himself, and pleads :—

You must bear with me :

Pray you now, forget and forgive : I am old and foolish.

In reference to this scene, Victor Hugo asks us to remark the beautiful 'maternity of the daughter over the father.'

Then comes the battle, the struggle of the army of light against the army of darkness. If you had not been told

the issue, you would feel certain, now, that victory must decide for this brave and faithful daughter. But, no! Goneril and Regan win the battle, and the old king dies of a broken heart with the body of the murdered Cordelia in his arms.

When Lear and Cordelia are taken prisoners, they are led away together ; and this scene tells us how they bear the catastrophe :—

Cor.

We are not the first

Who, with best meaning, have incurr'd the worst.

For thee, oppressed king, I am cast down ;

Myself could else out-frown false fortune's frown.

Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters ?

Lear. No, no, no, no ! Come, let's away to prison :

We too alone will sing like birds i' the cage :

When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,

And ask of thee forgiveness : so we'll live,

And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh

At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues

Talk of court news ; and we'll talk with them too,

Who loses and who wins ; who's in, who's out ;

And take upon's the mystery of things,

As if we were God's spies : and we'll wear out,

In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,

That ebb and flow by the moon.

Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,

The gods themselves throw incense. Have I caught thee ?

He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven,

And fire us hence like foxes. Wipe thine eyes ;

Ere they shall make us weep, we'll see them starve first.

The most rending passage in the play is that which describes the entrance of the old king with the dead Cordelia in his arms, after he has slain the man who hanged her in prison. He cannot believe that she is dead ; he holds a

feather to her dear lips, and when he thinks her breath moves it, cries :—

This feather stirs ; she lives ! if it be so,
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
That ever I have felt.

Then he fancies he hears her whisper to him :—

Cordelia, Cordelia ! stay a little. Ha !
What is't thou say'st ? Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman.

When all hope of life is gone, the old man sinks into despair :—

No, no, no life !
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all ? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never !
Pray you, undo this button : thank you, sir.
Do you see this ? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there !

What concentrated pathos there is in that line which tells of the bursting heart :—

Pray you, undo this button : thank you, sir.

We are thankful that at last he is at peace, and with a sigh of relief we say with Kent :—

Vex not his ghost : oh, let him pass ! he hates him much
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer.

The army of light is conquered by the forces of darkness ; and yet, in the very hour of victory, the two sisters pass away in violent deaths,—Regan poisoned by Goneril, and

Goneril choosing suicide to the exposure of her vice and treachery. Sin appears to be self-destructive ; and we feel sure that a happier time is come for the distracted land now that the rulers of darkness are swept away from their thrones.

Shakspeare frequently displays a wonderful audacity of genius ; but I sometimes marvel how he *dared* to end this play with such an awful catastrophe as the murder of Cordelia. What did he mean by Lear's broken heart, and Cordelia's sacrificial death ? He meant what Providence means, when its events refuse to let us measure the worth of goodness by any outward triumph or earthly happiness ; he meant to teach us that it was well for Cordelia to die a blessed martyr rather than have proved treacherous to her own pure heart ; that it was better for Lear to pass through that purgatory of suffering and madness, and find again the love he once outraged, than reign in royal state to the end of his days ; better to die of a broken heart clasping his dead daughter to his breast, than go through life with that violent self-will which blinded his eyes and petrified his feelings. We need not too much mourn over such a death as this,—a death in which we have the conquest of pride and passion in love and penitence, and against the darkness of which a blessed saint shines in glorious martyrdom. The play ends, indeed, in a heart-rending tragedy ; but it also ends in the redemption of man through the supreme triumph of woman's love.

III.

OTHELLO.

To understand is to pardon.' -GEORGE SAND.

[The date of this play is doubtful, and it can only be conjectured as about 1604; it belongs to Shakspeare's third period. The plot was suggested by a story in the *Hecatombithi* of Cinthio; and it is interesting to notice that in 1570 the Turks attacked Cyprus as they threaten to do in this play.]

I. THE SECRET MARRIAGE.

LIKE *King Lear*, *Othello* is a tragedy of domestic life. *King Lear* deals with the relation of father and children, *Othello* with the relation of husband and wife. This is the story of a mistake, a dreadful delusion, a fatal misunderstanding. The secret of the play is not an unsuitable marriage or a jealous husband, but the malice and cruelty of a bad man called Iago. Here, as in *King Lear*, there is no element of supernaturalism or enchantment. The whole plot is contained within the limits of human nature; and the elements of the story are so familiar that our personal interest is sustained throughout. There is nothing strained or improbable in the narrative. Brabantio's home, the Venetian senate-chamber, the news of war, the hurried farewells, the bustling scenes at Cyprus, the midnight brawl, the lady's bedroom where she undresses to the song of *The Willow*, the cruel awakening, the sudden

murder, the awful penitence,—these scenes are all familiar to us; we do not look upon them from the outside, we seem to move amidst them, they are so natural and real. In *King Lear* there is a certain monstrousness which makes us feel apart from the general course of events, and we regard the play as we should some mighty phenomenon of nature. But in *Othello* we have a certain sense of domesticity. We are affected by the events almost as though they had happened in some family with which we were personally acquainted. The cultured home at Venice where the beautiful daughter lives with her widowed father, the visit of the splendid Moorish soldier with his regal air and courteous manners and fascinating conversation, the growth of love between the brave warrior and the gentle maiden, the secret marriage, the broken-hearted father, the frightful suspicions, the ruin of earthly happiness, the moral confusion and violent deaths,—we trace all these things from first to last, and feel an intense personal interest in every new unfolding of this heart-rending story.

I do not think we ought to lay too much stress upon the unsuitableness of Desdemona's marriage. Shakspeare wants to make us realise how a perfect marriage was sundered through the malignity of a wicked man. In every possible way he tries to make us regard Othello as worthy of Desdemona's love; and it detracts from the intense humanity of the play to regard the marriage as unnatural or abhorrent. Othello boasts that he comes of lineage as good as any Venetian can claim; and but for his love for Desdemona, he would think it no great honour to be bound in marriage to any daughter of the proud city:—

'Tis yet to know,—
Which, when I know that boasting is an honour,

I shall promulgate—I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege, and my demerits
May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune
As this that I have reach'd : For know, Iago,
But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
I would not my unhoused free condition
Put into circumscription and confine
For the sea's worth.

When the Senators hear of the marriage they express no repugnance ; and we may notice how, in one of the minor characters, Shakspeare helps us to sympathise with Desdemona's choice of a husband. She had received many offers of marriage from the fops and gallants who abounded in the gay city of Venice ; and in Roderigo we are significantly shown the kind of Venetian gentlemen who used to come to try to win the maiden's hand. No wonder that, in comparison with such an empty fool and unprincipled libertine, the splendid Othello should draw the currents of her affection to himself and seem worthy of all her trust and love. Let us take Othello's own description of the courtship as he stands before the Senate charged with having won Desdemona's love by 'cunning practices of hell':—

Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors,
My very noble and approved good masters,
That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter,
It is most true ; true, I have married her :
The very head and front of my offending
Hath this extent, no more. Rude am I in my speech,
And little bless'd with the soft phrase of peace ;
For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith,
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used
Their dearest action in the tented field,
And little of this great world can I speak,
More than pertains to feats of broil and battle,
And therefore little shall I grace my cause

In speaking for myself. Yet, by your gracious patience,
 I will a round unvarnish'd tale deliver
 Of my whole course of love ; what drugs, what charms,
 What conjuration and what mighty magic,
 For such proceeding I am charged withal,
 I won his daughter.

* * * * *

Her father loved me ; oft invited me ;
 Still question'd me the story of my life,
 From year to year ; the battles, sieges, fortunes,
 That I have pass'd.
 I ran it through, even from my boyish days,
 To the very moment that he bade me tell it ;
 Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances,
 Of moving accidents by flood and field,
 Of hair-breadth scapes i' the imminent deadly breach,
 Of being taken by the insolent foe
 And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence
 And portance in my travels' history :
 Wherein of antres vast, and deserts idle,
 Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven,
 It was my hint to speak,—such was the process ;
 And of the Cannibals that each other eat,
 The Anthropophagi and men whose heads
 Do grow beneath their shoulders. These things to hear
 Would Desdemona seriously incline :
 But still the house affairs would draw her thence :
 Which ever as she could with haste despatch,
 She'd come again, and with a greedy ear
 Devour up my discourse : Which I observing,
 Took once a pliant hour, and found good means
 To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart
 That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,
 Whereof by parcels she had something heard,
 But not intently : I did consent,
 And often did beguile her of her tears,
 When I did speak of some distressful stroke
 That my youth suffer'd. My story being done,

She gave me for my pains a world of sighs :
She swore, In faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful :
She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd
That heaven had made her such a man : she thank'd me,
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story,
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake :
She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd,
And I loved her that she did pity them.
This only is the witchcraft I have used :
Here comes the lady ; let her witness it.

And the lady *does* witness to it without hesitation. Her father says :—

Come hither, gentle mistress :
Do you perceive in all this noble company
Where most you owe obedience ?

To which Desdemona replies :—

My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty :
To you I am bound for life and education ;
My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you ; you are the lord of duty ;
I am hitherto your daughter : But here's my husband,
And so much duty as my mother show'd
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord.

The poor old man can say no more but 'God be with you ! I have done ;' he is broken-hearted ; his last words, as he bids farewell to his daughter and her husband, seem to sound the knell of coming woe :—

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see :
She has deceived her father, and may thee.

The last we hear of Brabantio is in the sad words of Gratiano over the dead body of Desdemona :—

Poor Desdemona ! I'm glad thy father's dead :
Thy match was mortal to him, and pure grief
Shore his old thread in twain.

The gentle lady's nature was completely conquered by the swift tide of this strong man's love ; he had roused in her those most compelling emotions of imagination, pity and reverence. It was his lofty mind, his honourable soul, that won her to him ; and she feels that there is nothing in her affection she needs be ashamed of. This *is* her husband, and she is proud to call herself his wife :—

That I did love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence and storm of fortunes
May trumpet to the world : my heart's subdued
Even to the very quality of my lord :
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honours and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.

This is no superficial fancy ; but a deep, passionate union of two noble natures, for whom there *might have been* as perfect blessedness as earth can give. Indeed, to Desdemona, her love for Othello was almost a kind of religion. Even when his nature seemed to change, not for a moment did she regret that for his sake she had left her home. When he cannot control his anger in her presence, she still thinks it is only some bad news which has troubled him, and will not suffer one word of reproach to be spoken. When he strikes her before the Venetian embassy, she only replies, 'I have not deserved this,' and meekly leaves his presence. At last he tells her of the frightful accusation ; and she is simply struck dumb ; she can scarcely realise who

she is or where she may be. When Emilia comes in, we notice how dazed the poor lady is by the replies she gives her maid :—

Emil. Alas, what does this gentleman conceive ?

How do you, madam ? how do you, my good lady ?

Des. 'Faith, half asleep.

Emil. Good madam, what's the matter with my lord ?

Des. With who ?

Emil. Why, with my lord, madam.

Des. Who is thy lord ?

Emil. He that is yours, sweet lady.

Des. I have none : Do not talk to me, Emilia ;

I cannot weep ; nor answer I have none,

But what should go by water.

Instead of rousing herself to indignant scorn of a husband who can use such terms to his wife, she begins to wonder whether she may not have unconsciously given him reason for suspicion by something in her conduct. *That* must be the cause of it all ; perhaps she has been too giddy and frivolous, and if so, she must bear the blame of misconstruction :—

'Tis meet I should be used so, very meet.

How have I been behaved, that he might stick

The small'st opinion on my least misuse ?

And yet she cannot help wishing he had been gentler in his correction :—

Those that do teach young babes,

Do it with gentle means and easy tasks :

He might have chid me so ; for, in good faith,

I am a child to chiding.

Nothing could make her doubt him. Though he slay her yet will she trust him :—

that I do not yet, and ever did,
And ever will—though he do shake me off
To beggarly divorcement—love him dearly,
Comfort forswear me! Unkindness may do much;
And his unkindness may defeat my life,
But never taint my love.

When she is undressing, on the fatal night, for the bed from which she must never rise again, Emilia says, 'I would you had never seen him,' to which the faithful wife replies:—

So would not I: my love doth so approve him,
That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns,—
Prithee, unpin me,—have grace and favour in them.

She cannot understand him; she only knows that her trust and confidence remain unchanged. Even the cruel dagger, which struck her life, could not touch the integrity of her love. And she is faithful unto death; when her maid finds her dying in the bedroom and asks, 'O, who hath done this deed?' Desdemona dies with these words upon her lips:—

Nobody; I myself. Farewell:
Commend me to my kind lord: O, farewell!

She still fancies she must unconsciously have been guilty of a fault which has roused suspicion in Othello's mind; and so she regards herself as the real cause of the cruel deed, and will not allow a reproachful thought of her 'kind lord.'

This is a sacred passion, which exalts a woman's love into something of religious faith. Her love for Othello was an unreserved surrender; she never wavered from her vow to honour and reverence him; she 'loved him with that love which was her doom.'

2. IAGO.

THE paradise of love was perfect ; but there entered into it a devil,—the cleverest and most malignant devil that ever became incarnate in human form. All was going well, the dawn of love promised the sunshine of a perfect day, when suddenly a cloud arose, the sky darkened, a thick fog enveloped all things in horrid gloom, the path of love and duty appeared a haunted labyrinth, and familiar faces seemed distorted with falsehood and vice. Here, as in *Macbeth*, the Power of Evil again presents itself. It seems impossible for genius to deal with the mysteries of life without facing that problem of sin. In many different ways genius has presented this protean element of the world. The Satan of the Book of Job, the fallen Archangel of Milton's epic, the Mephistopheles of Goethe's *Faust*, the Witches in *Macbeth*,—all these express and partially interpret the problem of evil. And I do not think I exaggerate when I say that Iago is one of the most terrific embodiments of the evil principle ever conceived by the imagination of poet or painter. The Satan of the Book of Job seems to have a serviceable function in the plans of Providence ; the fallen Archangel of Milton is in many respects a splendid creature, the very audacity of whose rebellion stirs our interest and almost excites our admiration ; Mephistopheles has no other concern than to win his wager, he neither loves nor hates, Faust has put himself into his hands, and he wants to prove successful in the end ; the Witches are sexless creatures, outside the pale of human nature. But we are compelled to call Iago a *man*, and yet he is the most thorough-going devil of them all. This bluff, brave, outspoken, genial young soldier, not thirty years of age, is incomparably more hateful than the serpent which went

crawling amongst the groves of Eden. As Swinburne says, 'Iago is the most perfect evil-doer, the most potent demi-devil.'

And yet, from another point of view, Iago is less frightful than the other representatives of the evil principle, because in his career we learn its inevitable failure. In Iago we find that evil is not so much a person or a principle as the *downward tendency* of human nature, which can only result in ruin. There seems no reason why a Satan or a Mephistopheles should not for ever remain in antagonism to God and enmity to man; but, in a world constituted like this, we can see that the schemes of an Iago must always ultimately fail. Iago represents the primal sin of pure self-interest, which tries to make the individual will the centre round which the world shall move. In the very completeness of the attempt we can see the inevitableness of the failure. The aim of sin is the subjugation of the world to the tyranny of self-will; but a world governed by a race of Iagos would no longer be a world, a cosmos; it would fall into chaos. In Iago we have evil so concentrated into an intense malignity that the soul becomes disengaged from all human affection and sympathy; in him we have the mystery of sin unveiled, and the revelation of its secret is the prophecy of its doom. As long as the riddle of the Sphinx remained unanswered, *there* the monster sat by the wayside destroying her bewildered victims; but as soon as her secret was discovered, she flung herself down the precipice in despair. And so when sin is seen as sin it must vanish away, in the light of eternal truth appearing as the dark chaotic element which is being eliminated in the gradual evolution of a divine universe. As the finest moral attainment is the love of goodness for its own sake without one side-glance towards reward or happiness, so the deepest moral degradation is the love of evil for its

own sake, the awful choice, 'Evil, be thou my good.' Iago has fallen into that dreadful hell; he does his best to believe that every man and woman is as false and impure as himself; he has no faith, no reverence, no pity, no religion; he is all intellect, marred by a malignant will. If you want to know what a man would become if he were stripped of everything but *knowledge, power and self-will*, you have his likeness in Iago.

When his victim, Roderigo, laments that he has not virtue enough to amend his evil passions, Iago utters the following words, which always seem to me to be the very concentration of devilish philosophy, the moral science of hell:—

Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles, or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs, or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness, or manured with industry, why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions: But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts.

Conscience is a sham, virtue a fine name. Our object in life is to gratify sense and passion, only using our reason to keep us from going to preposterous extremes, and making fools of ourselves! The greatest English poet since Shakspeare has taught us that intellect without love must always be atheistic.

Were knowledge all thy faculty—then God
Must be ignored. Love gains Him by first leap.

But Iago does not know what love means.

The good qualities of Cassio arouse no admiration ; he only hates him the more on account of them :—

If Cassio do remain,
He hath a daily beauty in his life
That makes me ugly.

He thinks himself the only 'honest' person, because he regards the profession of virtue a foolish sham, and hence he feels no touch of remorse as he invents his plot against Desdemona :—

So will I turn her virtue into pitch ;
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all.

In that scene in the second act, when Iago shocks Desdemona by his contempt for women and his scepticism of their virtue, she asks him if he cannot bestow a word of praise 'on a deserving woman indeed, one that, in the authority of her merit, did justly put on the vouch of very malice itself.' Yes, says Iago, I will tell you what such a virtuous woman is good for :—

She was a wight, if ever such wight were,—
To suckle fools and chronicle small beer.

Thus, in every possible way, Shakspeare exhibits Iago as a man of will and intellect, devoid of conscience and without one spark of love. To him life is a game, and the men and women around him are the pieces. He thinks he has entire control of events ; he chuckles over the cleverness by which he is able to move these fools about as he wishes, making them do what he likes, and using them for his own designs. And how well his game seems to prosper ! He fills his pocket with Roderigo's gold ; he makes Cassio lose his office through a drunken brawl ; he converts Desde-

mona's generous pity into evidence of dishonour; he compels his wife to steal the fatal handkerchief; in every trivial event he shows Othello some proof of his wife's unfaithfulness. In this way his subtle intellect and persistent will direct the course of events. As in *The Tempest* Prospero is a divine providence, so in this play Iago tries to be a providence of hell; and as Prospero subdues all things to redeeming goodness and forgiving mercy, so Iago, if he could compass his dark design, would bring all things into the slavery of vilest selfishness and malignant hate. He seems to succeed; but how? He only succeeds in the outward confusion of events; he never triumphs for a moment over the powers of goodness. The witches not only deceived Macbeth, but worked the destruction of his soul. Iago is only able to entrap Othello in a labyrinth of delusion, to wrap him in a fog of suspicion, where he loses his way and distracts his mind. All through, Othello's honour is unstained; he maintains his loyalty to purity and truth. Even if it be touched with exaggeration, it is interesting to know Swinburne's verdict of Othello as 'the very noblest man whom even omnipotence or Shakspeare could ever call to life.' And never did Iago come within measurable distance of the heavenly chastity of Desdemona. In the conversation between Emilia and her mistress the night of the murder, Shakspeare lets us know how the daughter of the Venetian senator has been so carefully brought up that not a rumour of evil has been allowed to reach her ear; and when the suggestion of vice comes to her, she at once declares that she would rather lose the whole world than stain her soul:—

Des. Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?

Emil. The world's a huge thing: it is a great price
For a small vice.

Des. In troth, I think thou wouldst not.

Emil. In troth, I think I should; and undo't when I had done. Marry, I would not do such a thing for a joint-ring, nor for measures of lawn, nor for gowns, petticoats, nor caps, nor any petty exhibition; but, for the whole world! I should venture purgatory for't.

Des. Beshrew me, if I would do such a wrong for the whole world.

Emil. Why, the wrong is but a wrong i' the world; and, having the world for your labour, 'tis a wrong in your own world, and you might quickly make it right.

Des. I do not think there is any such woman.

She can scarcely bring herself to believe in the existence of such vice as she hears of now for the first time. The 'false woman' which Iago raises before the warped vision of Othello is created by inveterate malice and dark suspicion. The real Desdemona is pure as snow, and never does the shadow of a thought of evil darken her mind. Emilia is roused by the discovery of her husband's guilt into a brave denunciation of his treachery, and dies a nobler woman than she has lived. Cassio, by his sad experience, learns the folly of easy compliance with temptation and the dangers of sensual pleasure. And even the foolish Roderigo, before his death, utters his abhorrence of the traitor who has robbed, betrayed and murdered him. Not in a single instance does Iago work the destruction of the soul; he can only for a time create delusion; but when the delusion ends, *truth* rises into triumph, *purity* displays its stainless beauty, and *love* is supreme even in the agony of death.

I am impressed all through this play by the utter isolation of Iago. He lives alone, in a world of unmitigated malice, unrelieved by one touch of friendship, one chord of responsive love. The bluff, honest soldier he appears to be is a mask, a piece of clever hypocrisy; the real Iago is

unknown, unguessed even by his own wife, who shudders when she discovers that she has been mated to an incarnate fiend. Completed selfhood is the breaking of every bond which makes a man the sharer of the life of his race ; sin, when it is finished, *does* cast the soul into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. If it were possible for a soul to concentrate all its life upon itself alone, denying every relation to God and man, then it would become an outcast demon, either to sink into annihilation, or else, through the very agony of intolerable loneliness, to shiver into penitence at the feet of God, to groan out its unutterable longing to be taken again as a child into the great human brotherhood.

3. THE TERRIBLE MISTAKE.

THE chief interest of the play centres in the course of events by which Iago enmeshes Othello's noble nature in the toils of his malignity. It is a total misreading of the play to regard Othello as moved by jealousy. Jealousy is the last passion to which Othello could be moved ; indeed, he was almost childlike in the confidence of his ' free and noble nature.' Iago, who hates him, is obliged to confess

The Moor is of a free and noble nature,
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so ;

and he says in another part of the play :—

The Moor—howbeit that I endure him not—
Is of a constant-loving noble nature ;
And I dare think he'll prove to Desdemona
A most dear husband.

His wife will not admit the possibility of his proving jealous :—

My noble Moor

Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness

As jealous creatures are.

. I think the sun where he was born

Drew all such humours from him.

What shook Othello's soul was this: it seemed to him that the fairest and most lovely creature he had ever met was proved to be most foul and pestilent. I say 'proved,' because Iago's devices had convinced Othello, beyond a doubt, that his wife was false. It is easy for us to blame Othello for becoming the victim of this ingenious fiend. We know all about Iago from the first,—the black thoughts which swarm within his brain, the evil purposes which his craftiness designs. But Othello knew nothing of all this. He knew nothing of Iago's hypocrisy, but he sees how Cassio haunts Desdemona with his presence, and slinks away as soon as her husband comes near; he hears from Desdemona's own lips her pity for Cassio, and her persistent demands that he be forgiven; he knows that his wife is deceiving him about the handkerchief which has been found in Cassio's house; he actually listens while, as he thinks, he hears Cassio's shameless confession of Desdemona's guilt, and he sees Bianca bring the fatal handkerchief which she has received as a gift from her lover. Here surely was matter, not for suspicion, but for certainty; no other explanation was possible except the unspeakable perjury and malice of Iago, and that was the last thing to suggest itself to Othello's mind. Iago was his honest friend, with no personal interests to serve, and only anxious that his captain should not be the dupe of a beautiful, bad woman. We must remember that Emilia never suspected that her husband could have been capable of such malicious crime; and when he comes into the chamber of death, she leaps towards him, exclaiming:—

Disprove this villain, if thou be'st a man :
He says, thou told'st him that his wife was false :
I know thou didst not, thou'rt not such a villain :
Speak, for my heart is full.

Othello believes him entirely, and is completely taken in by his professions of loyalty and love. When Iago says, 'My lord, you know I love you,' Othello answers :—

I think thou dost ;
And, for I know thou'rt full of love and honesty,
And weigh'st thy words before thou givest them breath,
Therefore these stops of thine fright me the more :
For such things in a false disloyal knave
Are tricks of custom, but in a man that's just
They are close delations working from the heart
That passion cannot rule.

The very fascination of the story consists in our constant anxiety to expose Iago, to explain the plot to Othello, and avert the horrid catastrophe. It was more than jealous suspicion, it was absolute proof that the woman he worshipped was false. If, indeed, Othello had been jealous by nature, his agony would have been much less severe. If he had been, like Iago, an unbeliever in woman's virtue, he would have said, 'Just what I might have expected, the more beautiful the more traitorous!' and he would merely have cast Desdemona off with words of anger. But the association of evil with his gracious wife comes as a shock to his nature, which he feels he cannot survive. He is shaken with the unwonted passion. We all know about the evils which are in the world, yet as long as they do not touch us we are not crushed by the burden of iniquity. But when some one nearest and dearest becomes stained with guilt, we feel as though chaos was come again.

That was Othello's feeling when his ideal of chastity

seemed besmirched with vice. It was moral repugnance, and not selfish jealousy, which made him recoil in passion from such a catastrophe. Desdemona was not only another woman gone wrong, but her crime seemed to him so monstrous that the world must be rid of her presence ; her death seemed but a small matter in comparison with her unfaithfulness. His tender, reverential love for his wife turns into a storm of righteous passion against sin ; just as the electricity which pervades the calm beauty of the summer day bursts forth into the dreadful tempest of flashing lightning and rolling thunder. He slays Desdemona, not in personal revenge, but as a minister of justice ; not to free himself from an intolerable calamity, but to make atonement for a crime which has dragged his own life down into dark despair.

If Othello had been naturally a jealous man, he would never have thrown away his life for the sake of a woman's frailty ; it was because he was a stranger to jealousy that the mere suspicion infected his mind like poison. When a man has, for a long time, indulged in a poisonous drug, his constitution becomes so seasoned to its action, that at length he can take a powerful dose without danger or inconvenience ; but to an unaccustomed constitution a single drop will ferment the blood, shatter the nerves, and make the brain boil with madness. Iago doubts *his* wife ; but his suspicion only adds a new interest to the game, and gives additional excuse for certain clever moves of the puppets of his will. On the other hand, in the free, generous nature of Othello, one thought of suspicion works like deadly poison, and subdues all the passions to its fatal influence. And the stronger the constitution the more prolonged is the death-agony. A weaker man would have collapsed at once, but in Othello's anguish we watch the writhings and torments of a giant as he struggles with

mortal pain ; we are reminded of Hercules as he tore his flesh to get rid of the poisoned shirt which struck fire through every avenue of his frame. When he is convinced that his wife is false, a tide of pity rises in his breast for the gentle maiden he took from her father's house ; he is resolved to slay her, but in an agony of conflicting feelings he turns to Iago with those awful words :—

Nay, that's certain : but the pity of it, Iago ! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago !

And Iago watches the operation of the poison as a physiologist notes the working of a drug in an animal on which he is making an experiment ; he actually enjoys the process of vivisection, and studies, with malicious interest, every new symptom of the disease with which he has inoculated this noble nature. When he sees his captain approaching with deep anguish written in his face, his only thoughts are these :—

Look, where he comes ! Not poppy, nor mandragora,
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep,
Which thou owedst yesterday.

At one time the mortal agony is too great even for Othello's stalwart frame ; the strain is so severe that he falls to the ground, and for a time becomes unconscious. Iago stands looking at him in mockery, saying :—

Work on,
My medicine, work ! Thus credulous fools are caught ;
And many worthy and chaste dames even thus,
All guiltless, meet reproach.

One drop after another he pours into the distracted soul ; the fever rises ; the very intensity of the love rouses the

fierceness of the passion ; the designs of malice are achieved, and Desdemona lies murdered in her bed.

4. SECRET SINS.

IN this play we notice how the victims unconsciously laid themselves open to the devices of Iago. Desdemona's unfilial conduct to her father in the secret engagement and marriage was one fatal element in the tragedy. She lacked moral courage to trust her father with the story of her love. It is significant that the first word of suspicion was spoken to Othello, not by Iago, but by Brabantio :—

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see :
She has deceived her father, and may thee.

And Iago recalls this when he says :—

She did deceive her father marrying you.

And, again, if Cassio had never fallen into that drunken brawl, or if he had been less of a libertine, he could not have been made the tool to work the ruin of the captain whom he loved and honoured. Then the dropping of the handkerchief, followed by Emilia's theft, and Desdemona's frightened denials of the loss, all helped to precipitate the disaster. The clever Iago took up these broken threads, and wove them into a net to enmesh his victims.

And yet, with all his cleverness, Iago, in the final catastrophe, is the most hopeless victim of all. He stands, with mocking smile, while every countenance looks on him with unutterable loathing, and even his wife heaps her execration on his head. The noble Othello writhes in the torture of remorse as he looks on the sweet woman whom he has wronged and slain ; and all the while Iago can only think

with pride of how he spread the net and caught the victim. He has made evil his good ; he has tried to drag others down to his own degradation ; he has blasphemed the god-like elements of human nature ; he has committed the sin against the Holy Ghost, for which, we are told, there is no forgiveness. Othello turns to his friends, saying :—

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body ?

And Iago replies with these final words :—

Demand me nothing : what you know, you know :
From this time forth I never will speak words.

We feel sure that he kept his resolution, that no torments ever broke his indomitable spirit or forced a word of remorse from his lips. As we part from him in this last scene, we can understand what Swinburne means when he calls Iago ‘a hellish Prometheus.’

Yes ! Iago is the most hopeless victim of all. For as we look on the tragic loading of that bed, we feel that, though the bodies have perished, the souls are saved. Desdemona with her dying breath gasps out her undying love ; Emilia makes atonement for her grossness and falsehood by that splendid vindication of her lady’s chastity ; and Othello cleanses his soul from every stain of poisonous suspicion as he pours out his life a ransom for his sin, falls upon the body of the fair woman he has slain, and dies upon a kiss. But for Iago there is no pity, no remorse, no atonement ; he stands exposed in all the horror of his crime, and knows no shame ; he looks at the ruin he has made, and he feels no touch of penitence. He represents the finished work of sin ; the evil recoils upon itself, and accomplishes its own destruction. Shakspeare sheds not a ray of supernatural

light upon the mystery ; he points us to no reward of suffering in a future heaven ; he opens up no bottomless pit for the punishment of sin after death. But he makes us hate sin with a perfect hatred ; he shows us the evil of secret sins as well as of great crimes. The secret thought of sin, the momentary yielding to temptation, a touch of moral cowardice, in their measure may rank us on the side of the powers of darkness ; or at least they may draw us into that moral twilight where we are caught up into the meshes of malicious vice ; and even if we save our souls, we have to make atonement in the purgatorial fires of some great agony. That is one of the solemn lessons which Shakspeare teaches. The hasty falsehood, the small theft, the secret deception, the lazy compliance, the enticing pleasure,—these insignificant details of our imperfect nature may bring us within the reach of some evil influence, which, if it do not destroy our souls, may work direful ruin, and plunge us into a dark despair from which we can only be delivered ‘so as by fire.’

To keep ourselves from entanglement in the toils of the rulers of darkness we need the constant prayers : ‘Search me, O God, and know my heart ; try me, and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me ;’ ‘Cleanse Thou me from secret sins.’

IV.

THE WINTER'S TALE.

'And she is gone ; sweet human love is gone !
'Tis only when they spring to heaven that angels
Reveal themselves to you ; they sit all day
Beside you, and lie down at night by you,
Who care not for their presence—muse or sleep,
And all at once they leave you, and you know them !
We are so fooled, so cheated !'

ROBERT BROWNING.

[The plot of this play was suggested by a tale of Greene's called *Pandosto ; or, the Triumph of Time*. We have evidence that it was acted at the Globe Theatre on May 15th, 1611 ; it was probably written in the year 1610. *The Winter's Tale* belongs to Shakspeare's Fourth Period.]

THIS beautiful story may be divided into three parts,—
MISUNDERSTANDING, SEPARATION, REUNION.

I. MISUNDERSTANDING.

THE misunderstanding is of a very different kind from that which we studied in *Othello*. Jealousy was a passion quite alien to the free and noble nature of the Moor ; and in consequence, the conviction of Desdemona's unfaithfulness wrought like madness in his mind, and made his life unbearable. The deadly poison was dropped into Othello's soul by the malice of Iago ; but in the case of King Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* there is a constitutional taint, a black

drop in the blood, which suddenly develops its venom and ferments into a fever of jealousy. We are told that our bodies are born with predisposition to a certain disease, which may be latent for years, but which, on occasion, will suddenly attack the life. So every soul is predisposed to a certain form of evil ; there is an easily besetting sin, which only waits for the strong temptation to assail the citadel of the moral being. Pope tells us :—

As man, perhaps, the moment of his breath,
Receives the lurking principle of death ;
The young disease, that must subdue at length,
Grows with his growth, and strengthens with his strength ;
So cast and mingled with his very frame,
The mind's disease, its ruling passion came.

That is what Shakspeare teaches in this apparently sudden change of Leontes into a jealous husband and a treacherous friend. This is the sudden bursting forth of a long hidden taint of character. And we make the less excuse for Leontes because he should have known his wife, Hermione, too well to have thought her capable of crime. Othello scarcely knew his bride ; their intercourse had been very brief ; their married life had scarcely commenced before the dark suspicion was whispered in his ear. But Hermione had been the faithful wife of Leontes for years, and was the mother of his son ; while Polixenes had been his intimate friend from earliest boyhood. Compared with Othello, Leontes appears a weak, superficial, suspicious, rash, and obstinate man. In his jealous passion we never feel one spark of sympathy with him ; he appears utterly unworthy of his splendid queen ; and it is only the depth of his penitence which at last touches our heart and moves our compassion. Leontes was one of those men who have only room in their minds for a single idea ; and a single idea, unmodified by others, is always

false. The man of one idea is always absolute in his conclusions, infallible in his judgments, and furiously angry with every suggestion that he may possibly be mistaken. All the events of life are translated into the language of the one tyrannical thought; facts are used as the alphabet out of which to spell the hasty verdict and the cruel sentence. Leontes sees the courtesy and friendship of Hermione towards his old friend Polixenes. His knowledge both of wife and friend ought to have prevented one evil thought. But the latent disease in his constitution begins to operate; the jealous passion infects his nature, dominating every affection and impulse; within his narrow mind there is only room for the one over-mastering thought; love and friendship are for the time crushed out; to his jaundiced eye courtesy looks like licentiousness, and the freedom of mutual trust appears full evidence of crime. And when once the suspicion has seized him, he is helpless in its power. When the lurking fever spreads through the veins, no medicine can check its course; it must develop itself to a crisis, which shall end either in death or in recovery. The jealousy of Leontes becomes a point of honour with him. Against the calm denials of his wife and the entreaties of his friends he maintains his unworthy thought as though it were an article of religious faith. To the obliquity of his vision everything becomes twisted and deformed; to his violent prejudice the most spotless purity seems stained with sin. The whole conduct of this mistaken man is a commentary on the words of Solomon: 'Jealousy is cruel as the grave; and the coals thereof are coals of fire which hath a most vehement flame.'

In *Macbeth* we saw how an ambitious woman can work the ruin of the man she loves; but in *The Winter's Tale* we find Hermione becoming the providence of her husband, by her calm endurance and unwearied patience

working out the salvation of his soul. I do not think that in all the writings of Shakspeare there is a more finished creation than the character of Hermione. She may not attract the notice of the general reader so much as the passionate Juliet, the sparkling Portia, or the magnificent Cleopatra ; but to the careful student every word she speaks is a sacred thing, revealing the divine beauty of the soul of a perfect wife and mother. At first there is, perhaps, a 'statuesqueness' in the impression she makes upon us, a classical severity which seems to lack warmth and impulse. But as we become better acquainted with this majestic lady, we find that the apparent cold reserve is due to the depth and serenity of her nature. I hope my readers are familiar with one of Wordsworth's finest poems, called *Laodamia* ; if so, they will remember the words :—

The gods approve
The depth, and not the tumult of the soul.

I never read this touching story of Hermione without recalling those lines. In this gracious queen there is an infinite depth of patient love ; amidst the storm of jealousy and head-strong fury which assails her, she maintains her serene and stately womanhood, as though she were a goddess looking down in pity on the wrath of men, never for a moment impatient with their rage or angry with their foolishness. She never speaks a shrill or hasty word ; she never loses self-restraint in burning speech or hysterical passion.

At the commencement of the second act, we have that domestic picture of little Mamillius with his mother. Hermione is weary, and sends the child to play with her maids, whom he teases about the colour of their eyebrows and noses ; after a while his mother calls him to her side again, and tries to keep him quiet by asking him to tell her

a tale, and there is pathetic significance in what follows. Hermione says :—

What wisdom stirs amongst you ? Come, sir, now
I am for you again : Pray you, sit by us,
And tell's a tale.

Mam. Merry, or sad, shall't be ?

Her. As merry as you will.

Mam. A sad tale's best for winter :
I have one of sprites and goblins.

Her. Let's have that, good sir.
Come on, sit down : Come on, and do your best
To fright me with your sprites ; you're powerful at it.

Mam. There was a man——

Her. Nay, come, sit down ; then on.

Mam. Dwelt by a churchyard : I will tell it softly ;
Yon crickets shall not hear it.

Her. Come on then,
And give't me in mine ear.

But the little lad was never to finish his *Winter's Tale* about the man and the churchyard, commenced in sof and solemn childish voice ; for a sadder tale at that moment begins as Leontes enters and startles the happy group with his angry face and stormy speech.

When Leontes first assails her with his jealousy, Hermione cannot understand what he means, and asks in painful surprise :—

What is this ? sport ?

When he persists, she simply denies the charge, and in her unsophisticated honour takes for granted that he will believe her word :—

I'll be sworn you would believe my saying,
Howe'er you lean to nayward.

His cruel persistence would have lashed many a woman into hysterical fury ; but with gracious dignity this queen will not descend to vain argument and fierce reproach ; she simply speaks the calm emphatic words :—

You, my lord,
Do but mistake.

Indeed, as she marks the madness working in her husband's face and raging in his speech, her pity for him seems almost to make her forget her own wrongs. She looks him in the face with those calm, clear eyes, and says :—

How will this grieve you,
When you shall come to clearer knowledge, that
You thus have published me !

She never loses her hope that, sooner or later, Leontes will come to his right mind, and confess with bitter grief the wrong he has done his lady. As she turns away to go to prison, she says :—

Adieu, my lord :
I never wished to see you sorry ; now
I trust I shall.

Ah ! some one is tempted to say, this woman is *too* cold and statuesque ; she wants feeling ; she lacks warmth. But Shakspeare knows that the rain of tears and the torrent of words are not the evidence of deepest emotion. It is but a superficial passion which can so easily find relief in these.

The grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break.

Hermione herself fears lest she be reproached as hard and cold ; she turns to the astonished courtiers to say :—

Good my lords,
I am not prone to weeping, as our sex
Commonly are; the want of which vain dew
Perchance shall drown your pities: but I have
That honourable grief lodged here which burns
Worse than tears drown.

The greatest sufferers are those who endure in silence, who live through an unsuspected martyrdom, who die and make no sign. 'The amount of slow torture which human nature can endure, and yet stand on its feet and give no sign, is fearful to realise.' The outward wound, which every one sees and pities, is not nearly so fatal as the internal hæmorrhage, when the life's blood drops, drops away unheeded, and the torture is endured without one word of pity, one look of sympathy. Amongst all Shakespeare's heroines, I would exalt Hermione as the divine sufferer. As far as this story is concerned she scarcely *acts* at all; she simply *endures*, bearing up, in the wondrous strength of her undismayed womanhood, a whole world of shame and wrong and grief. In comparison with noisy action this passive strength appears godlike. 'Sorrow and silence are strong, and patient endurance is godlike.'

When she is brought to trial she still maintains her sublime regality of soul; not one word of angry passion escapes her lips. Not for herself does she prize her life and honour, but only for her children's sake:—

For life, I prize it
As I weigh grief, which I would spare: for honour,
'Tis a derivative from me to mine,
And only that I stand for.

She longs for her father to be with her in her hour of trial; yet not to avenge her wrongs, but only to pity her woes:—

The emperor of Russia was my father :
O, that he were alive, and here beholding
His daughter's trial ! that he did but see
The flatness of my misery, yet with eyes
Of pity, not revenge !

The climax of endurance is reached when the news comes of the death of her little son, Mamillius. The little prattler had such a noble nature, that he has broken his heart over his mother's sorrows :—

To see his nobleness !
Conceiving the dishonour of his mother,
He straight declined, droop'd, took it deeply,
Fasten'd and fix'd the shame on't in himself,
Threw off his spirit, his appetite, his sleep,
And downright languish'd.

The poor lady has bravely borne her matchless woes. She has been plunged into prison ; her new-born child, her baby girl, has been disowned and cast helpless on a foreign shore. She is brought as a criminal before the court, to answer for her life. And yet she endures, with sublime patience, all her mighty sorrows, until she hears that, in grief for his dear mother, her precious son has pined away and died. Then her woman's heart fails beneath the accumulated anguish ; she is borne fainting from the court, and in a few minutes Leontes hears the tidings that his wife is dead.

2. SEPARATION.

THE crisis of Leontes' fever of jealousy is reached when he refuses to believe the divine oracle which declares the innocence of his wife. Not even the sanctions of religion can move the soul when it is blinded by passion and

hardened by prejudice. Only by some severe discipline of sorrow can the evil spirit be cast out, and the demoniac restored to his right mind. Hermione is in court being tried for her life ; Leontes is bent upon her condemnation and sentence ; Cleomenes and Dion enter with the 'sealed-up oracle, by the hand delivered of great Apollo's priest ;' and the infatuated king consummates his folly by wilful blasphemy :—

There is no truth at all i' the oracle :

The sessions shall proceed : this is mere falsehood.

But while the outward revelation of truth fails, the discipline of sorrow shall become a power unto salvation. As Leontes speaks the words of blasphemy, a servant enters to tell him that his little son, the heir to his crown, has died of a broken heart because of his mother's woes :—

O sir, I shall be hated to report it !

The prince your son, with mere conceit and fear

Of the queen's speed, is gone.

In an instant his eyes are opened. By that blinding flash of sorrow the darkness is rent, and he sees the truth. As he confesses his injustice, Hermione faints, is carried out of the court, and soon a deeper grief descends upon the king when the news is brought that his wife too is dead. The death of little Mamillius was indeed sacrificial ; and, as far as we can see, without it the atonement would have been impossible. Swinburne feels inclined to reproach Shakespeare that to the end of the play the dead child seems to be entirely forgotten ; and yet I doubt not that he was a silent memory in that hour of ineffable bliss with which the story closes. Never could it be forgotten that the conversion of Leontes to his right mind required the broken heart of his only son. The death of little children

often seems a great mystery ; but we *can* see the meaning of such a death as this, when from the grave there rises such a harvest of repentance and love.

We are reminded of that exquisite poem of Tennyson's :—

As through the land at eve we went,
And plucked the ripened ears,
We fell out, my wife and I,
O we fell out I know not why,
And kissed again with tears.

For when we came where lies the child
We lost in other years,
There above the little grave,
O there above the little grave,
We kissed again with tears.

That baby's life was not wasted when its memory was for ever a link of love. Leontes, indeed, had done far more than 'fall out' with his wife ; so deep a sin needed some stern chastisement to rouse him to repentance.

This is the story of the misunderstanding. Now comes the long separation. Leontes is left alone ; his wife is gone ; his son, the young prince of

honourable thoughts,
Thoughts high for one so tender,

has died of anguish for his mother's cruel fate ; the new-born daughter is cast away in barbarous banishment. We look at the crushed and solitary man, and we learn that the saddest woes are not the result of the natural order of providence, but are the penalties of our own self-will and folly. We ourselves are the authors of life's most poignant sorrows.

In this romantic story we mark a change from the course of events in the great tragedies of Shakspeare's Third Period. *The Winter's Tale* belongs to the last cycle of

Shakspeare's plays,—the plays which make a new revelation of redemption and joy. In the great tragedies he was bewildered by the mystery of the world's evil, and could not get a clear vision of the meaning of life. When Cordelia lies dead upon King Lear's bosom, the story is all told, and the rest is silence. When Othello dies upon the bed where lies his murdered wife, we draw the curtain before the woeful tragedy. But in his latest plays Shakspeare rose above the darkness of death into a gospel of resurrection. Leontes is left in lonely anguish to brood over his folly. But the story only begins with the tragedy; it is to end in joy. Hermione is not dead; she is only hidden from sight, until, by a long probation, her husband shall prove himself worthy of her love. Paulina, wife of one of the lords of Sicilia, has taken the queen under her protection, and keeps her in strict seclusion until the hour when the lost babe is found again. It was Antigonus, husband of Paulina, who carried the infant away to be cast upon a savage coast, and since his departure he has never been heard of again. In the course of the story Shakspeare lets us know that Antigonus has been killed, and that the lost child, Perdita, has not perished, but is living in Bohemia as a shepherd's daughter. And wonderful to say, the son of Polixenes, King of Bohemia, has fallen in love with her, and is secretly visiting at the shepherd's cottage; so that the two children of the alienated friends are unconsciously healing ancient wounds by their young love. There are no lovelier descriptions of rural life than the scenes at the sheep-shearing festival, where the 'queen of curds and cream' dispenses the simple bounty of the home, and crowns her visitors with autumn flowers. Even the rascal Autolycus must be dealt gently with for the sake of the songs he brings and the part he bears in the unravelling of the plot. Swinburne well says, "At the sunrise of

Perdita beside Florizel it seems as if the snows of sixteen winters had melted all together into the splendour of one unutterable spring. They 'smell April and May' in a sweeter sense than it could be said of 'young Master Fenton : ' 'nay, which is more,' as his friend and champion Mistress Quickly might have added to mine host's commendatory remark, they speak all April and May ; because April is in him as naturally as May in her, by just so many years difference before the May-day of her birth as went to make up her dead brother's little lot of living breath, which in Beaumont's most lovely and Shakspeare-worthy phrase 'was not a life ; was but a piece of childhood thrown away.' " Florizel was just the age Perdita's brother would have been if he had lived.

While this sweet pastoral was taking place in Bohemia, Leontes was still plunged in grief in Sicilia. For sixteen years did Leontes live a childless widower, lamenting, with bitter penitence, the dear wife whom he had so little deserved and understood. Like so many of us, he only began to learn the value of Heaven's choicest gift when it was taken from his sight. He only began to understand his wife when, alas ! it was too late. It is so, more or less, with all of us. Unconsciously we go on living, from day to day, in the blessedness of an environing affection ; it comes so natural—as natural as the bread we eat and the air we breathe. We never think how our bliss depends on some gentle form that is ever at our side, some tiny child that never fails each evening to clamber on our knee. We do not think ; we do not see. Our eyes are holden that we should not know, until one day there is a form absent, a voice silent, and there in the dark firmament of death we see the shining angel, who once dwelt in our home, hidden in the veil of flesh. But Hermione is not dead ! To her husband she is dead. And yet she has only hidden herself away until the

appointed hour, when she shall be able to give herself back to him in a more perfect marriage bond. The divine oracle has hinted that the banished daughter shall one day be restored; and for that day Hermione will watch and wait and pray, and when it comes Leontes shall not only find the child he cast away, but also his wife shall come back as by a resurrection from the dead. For sixteen years the queen endures a living death; for sixteen years Leontes cleanses his soul by continual penitential sorrow; for sixteen years Perdita lives in obscurity, unconscious of her birthright. Sometimes people speak harshly of Hermione for withholding herself from her penitent husband all those years. But I am sure she knew best. You think of Leontes' bitter grief through that long season of separation; and I say the grief was needful, the suffering was well deserved; no purgatorial agony could be too great if it only proved effectual to cleanse his heart and to renew his soul. You think of the grief of Leontes; but you must also think how terrible to the sacred heart of Hermione was that separation; how interminable seemed the years of that living death! And, *however long she waited*, she would not restore herself until the will of Heaven was fulfilled in the return of the banished child. She could wait! The wrong which Leontes had done was deep, and deep likewise must be the penitence. His sin had pronounced a divorce, and not until he was made meet for a perfect marriage should the divorce be annulled. Hermione was stern; but hers was the sternness of an inexorable principle of love. Hermione was stern,—stern as that providence that will not relax its discipline, until it has done its work in completing our characters and cleansing our hearts. A wondrous parable this always seems to me,—of absence the great revealer, and death the gracious reconciler. Leontes began to understand his wife during

those years of separation, as he had never been able to do when he clasped her hands and looked into her eyes. Even before her bodily presence was restored, her spiritual presence had shone upon him, transfigured by the change of death. We live too close to see one another clearly; we must stand apart before we can get the true vision; absence alone can reveal the character; death brings a revelation which life could never give. When you go away upon a journey, how beautiful appears the home you have left behind; how you resolve that when you return you will be tenderer and more gracious to the dear ones who seem, in absence, to be so unutterably precious! And yet a few days in the old home are sufficient to obscure the truth, and hide the sacred shrine of priceless love. Indeed, we often fail to learn the lesson of our separations until the Great Separation comes, and then we reproach ourselves that we could not be made perfect in love until love's dearest object was taken from our side; then we cry, Ah! wast thou, an angel of goodness, so long with me, and yet did I not know thee; how did I grieve thy tender heart by my harsh words, and misunderstand thy sweet gentleness and patient endurance through my blindness and folly!

3. REUNION.

I NEED not give the romantic story of the flight of Florizel and Perdita from Bohemia to Sicilia. With her lover the maiden seeks protection at the court of her own father, who of course never dreams that his daughter has been spared. But I cannot help pointing out one fine touch of human feeling. When Perdita appears before Leontes, he is so fascinated that he cannot take his eyes from her face. The good and grave Paulina, always jealous for her

mistress, and never afraid to speak her mind even to the king, expostulates with him :—

Sir, my liege,
Your eye hath too much youth in't : not a month
'Fore your queen died, she was more worth such gazes
Than what you look on now.

Leontes, who cannot understand why he should feel such tender yearning to a maiden he has never seen before, replies :—

*I thought of her,
Even in these looks I made.*

At this time the sixteen years have done their work in bringing Leontes to repentance, while the outcast babe has been found and brought as a splendid maiden to her home ; and now we have only to wait for the resurrection of Hermione. The story of *Othello* set in darkness and death, but in *The Winter's Tale* a divine oracle has spoken the prophecy of light and life. And may we not say that the divine oracle had spoken in Shakspeare's own heart between the closing of *Othello* and the commencement of *The Winter's Tale* ? Had there not come to him some deeper experience of life's meaning ? Had he not gained some beatific vision of a life eternal ? Had not some still small voice whispered, 'Death is not the end. There is a resurrection into an ampler life, where misunderstandings shall be cleared, the lost found, sorrows healed, and joy made perfect ?' In this play I am always reminded of those touching words of Jesus to his disciples, where he tells them that he will have to leave them before they can understand him ; how it is expedient for him to go away, for if he go not away the Spirit (the meaning of his life and influence of his character) will never come to them. It was expedient for Hermione to go away during those long

years of separation, that she might come again in her own radiant beauty, unshadowed by one dark suspicion or evil thought. When she was visibly present, not even years of wedded love were able to reveal to Leontes the sacred womanhood in whose presence he lived. He thought her capable of shameful vice, and in his blindness he condemned her to disgrace. It is expedient for her to go away that he may become worthy of such a gift. He passes through the sixteen years of awful grief and constant self-reproach, haunted by the thought of her whom he so terribly misunderstood; and now, after such a time of penitence, his soul is purified, his sin is burnt away, and he is made worthy to have his wife restored.

When it is discovered that Perdita is the king's lost child, their joy is dashed by the needful confession of the fate of Hermione, hearing which the gentle daughter seems to those present to 'bleed-tears' of grief for the mother she has never seen. But in the midst of their woe Paulina calls them to follow her into a shrine, where 'that rare Italian master, Julio Romano,' has raised a life-like coloured statue of the queen. They enter. After long gazing on the masterpiece, the statue breathes, moves, lives, descends. In solemn silence the arms of Hermione are thrown around Leontes' neck, and across that gulf of years wife and husband claim each other in a love purified by fire! The feelings of Hermione are too deep for utterance. With consummate insight Shakspeare does not allow a single word to pass between the two. Their joy is ineffable, not lawful to be expressed in speech. It is only when Perdita silently kneels at her mother's feet that Hermione bursts into that cry to Heaven for a blessing on her child:—

You gods, look down,
And from your sacred vials pour your graces
Upon my daughter's head! Tell me, mine own,

Where hast thou been preserved ? where lived ? how found
Thy father's court ? for thou shalt hear that I,
Knowing by Paulina that the oracle
Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserved
Myself to see the issue.

To Leontes those sixteen years seem like an ugly dream, from which we wake in agony to find the beloved one warm and breathing at our side. And what if death be only an ugly dream?—‘the last superstition,’ as Heine calls it; ‘the last enemy which shall be destroyed,’ as Paul describes it! The climax of this play is surely a wondrous prophecy of the redemption of human nature, after the probation of earth and the parting of death, in the eternal life of heaven. Death is not the end ; it is only separation, to be followed by an everlasting reunion of souls in divine blessedness.

What is heaven? Is it golden streets, rivers of glass, gates of pearl, sounding harps and waving palms? Let us learn what heaven really is. It is a perfect home, where the lost are found, where broken bonds are reknit, where love is made perfect, and shadows melt into the light of God. Macbeth said that life was ‘a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing.’ No! Life is a ‘Winter's Tale;’ the story begins amidst the shocks and storms of time ; it seems to end in darkness and the grave ; but beyond there is the resurrection of the spring-time, the glorious summer of that heavenly land, where there shall be no winter of death, neither sorrow nor pain ; for God, the great pitiful, patient God, shall heal every broken heart, and wipe away tears from all eyes.

[In connection with the story of Hermione it is instructive to read the account of the death and resurrection of Alcestis in Robert Browning's *Balaustion's Adventure*.]

V.

HAMLET.

‘It is not merely what we have done, not merely the posthumous fruit of our activity that entitles us to honourable recognition after death; but also our striving itself, and especially our unsuccessful striving,—the shipwrecked, fruitless, but great-souled WILL to do.’—HEINE.

[This play belongs to Shakspeare's Third Period; its first draft was printed in 1603, and in 1604 it was published in a second quarto, ‘newly imprinted, and enlarged to almost as much again as it was.’ Swinburne regards with great interest the contrast of these two quartos, as giving us evidence of the care with which Shakspeare elaborated his plays, and the value he attached to his work. He says: ‘Scene by scene, line for line, stroke upon stroke and touch after touch, he went over all the old laboured ground again; and not to ensure success in his own day and fill his pockets with contemporary pence, but merely and wholly with a purpose to make it worthy of himself and his future students. Pence and praise enough it had evidently brought him in from the first. Not one single alteration in the whole play can have been made with a view to stage effect or to present popularity and profit; or we must suppose that Shakspeare, however great as a man, was naturally even greater as a fool. Every change in the text of *Hamlet* has impaired its fitness for the stage and increased its value for the closet in exact and perfect proportion.’ The original story of *Hamlet* belongs to the *Historia Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus; but it is supposed that Shakspeare had the plot suggested to him by a translation of Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*. The story is, however, completely transformed in the drama; for in the *Histoires* Hamlet is made to avenge his wrongs, marry two wives, and ascend the Danish throne.]

I. THE PROBLEM OF THE WORLD.

IN this play we learn how the problem of life was presented to the mind of Shakspeare. *Hamlet* was written midway in Shakspeare's dramatic career, when he was about thirty-eight years of age. The heyday of youth was past, and life lay before him as a serious concern and a mysterious problem. From the little we know of the events of Shakspeare's life, we may be sure that he had thought deeply and suffered severely; he had made great mistakes, fallen before temptation, felt the force of eager passions and strong desires; he knew what life could give; scarcely any form of human experience was hidden from him; he had tried and tested the value of the world, and now he gives his verdict, and in *Hamlet* tells us how he found life to be a dark tragedy. And, though that is a sad conclusion, it is not nearly so gloomy as that other in which we are told, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' Our poet does not think life a vain thing, but he does confess its solemn mystery; of that he is sure. Life may, indeed, be more than this: it may be a sacred gift, a divine discipline, a prologue to immortality; but at present, as far as this world is concerned, as an honest teacher who is not afraid to face the facts and utter all he knows, he tells us that life is a deep, dark tragedy. The most popular plays and romances are those which are steeped in tragic gloom, which describe the soul struggling against opposing forces, triumphing in moral greatness over its foes, and showing its majesty most of all when overwhelmed in the conflict with the powers of the world. No ancient myth ever touched the human heart like the story of the Titan Prometheus, who, as the reward of his benefits to mankind, was condemned by Zeus to be chained to Mount Caucasus, while a vulture continually tore his quivering flesh. The glorious thing about Prometheus was not

the depth of his agony, but the strength of his moral endurance. Rather than yield to the tyrant he would bear an eternity of torment; rather than be false to his own vision of justice he would defy the enemy of man. In the case both of the mythic Prometheus and the dramatic Hamlet it is the failure which has immortalised the hero. That is worth pondering. The most glorious poems chant the stories of heroes who have failed, and so pass an ethnic judgment on that paltry thing we call 'success.' If Prometheus had dethroned Zeus and seized upon the throne of heaven, he would never have become the theme of inspired song. If Hamlet had 'succeeded,' if he had banished his uncle, sent his mother to a nunnery, married Ophelia, and reigned till old age over a loyal nation, then he would never have become one of the most fascinating characters in the literature of the world. It is the seeming failure, combined with heroic endurance and moral triumph, which transfigure these stories with perennial significance.

Hamlet was a young man of lofty intellect, honourable soul, and loving heart; but he was diverted by a most cruel fate from the natural development of his character. In this play we watch him caught up by the machinery of terrible events, and then dashed down into destruction with the victims of conspiracy and crime. The interest of the play consists in watching a young, beautiful soul enmeshed by horrible circumstances, which rack and rend his sensitive nature. He cannot resolve these conflicting elements into order, nor yet is he able to escape from them. Throughout the play you not only watch the course of events as they roll by and carry this young soul along their tide, but you see into that soul itself. Goethe well says that Shakspeare's characters are like clocks with crystal cases; you not only see the fingers point the time, you also see the springs and wheels by which the fingers are moved. You are let

into the secrets of Hamlet's nature ; you see him trembling in the agitation of distracting doubts, writhing under the burden of a tremendous task, and tormenting himself with remorse for neglected duty. We learn that to the brave man life is often a conflict ; that when we enter the world we do not come into a pleasure-garden, but into a battle-field. I think *Hamlet* appeals more or less to the experience of every one of us. We are all Hamlets in our time. His difficulties and doubts, his postponements and hesitations, his weariness of life and shrinking from death, his faith in an overruling Providence, and his hope that sin and wrong will at last be conquered,—all these have had their place in the personal experience of most men. That is what startles us. In studying the character of Hamlet we see ourselves, —not merely our outward selves, but the interior workings of our mysterious nature. We see things we could never have guessed ; we come face to face with dread facts which we have been trying to forget and to crush out of our thought with all the iron weights in our power. Hamlet is a puzzle to us, because we are such puzzles to ourselves. When he created this character, Shakspeare seems to have had laid bare before his vision the abysmal depths of personality. This is not a literary invention, but a veritable creation, a vital product of Nature, who uses the genius of the poet to bring forth this unique existence. Julian Hawthorne says that Shakspeare's plays are more than an imitation of life ; they are life itself. The word *poet* means *maker, creator* ; and in that sense Shakspeare was, without question, the greatest poet the world has seen. He did not manufacture out of old materials ; he created new souls, which assumed their bodies and achieved their destinies by inevitable laws. Every great author has felt the over-mastering Spirit using him for a purpose to which he was led by an intellectual necessity.

The brain worked, the pen moved, in obedience to the presiding genius.

The passive master lent his hand
To the vast Soul that o'er him planned.

Hence, in studying the work of a great master, our task is not so much to criticise as to observe, study, accept, and try to understand, just as we should do in the case of a geological fossil or a flashing comet. This inspiration of intellectual necessity is our difficulty in the study of *Hamlet*. This play is not a kind of Chinese puzzle, which you can take to pieces and put together again; it is like an organism where no limb or function can be understood apart from its relation to the living whole. *Hamlet* does sometimes seem obscure; yet the obscurity is not in the clumsiness of its design, but in the depth of its perspective. The puddle and the ocean are both obscure—the one because it is so muddy, the other because it is so deep. There is all the difference between the obscurity of a London fog and the impenetrable depth of infinite space. In consequence we have various theories to account for this wonderful play, and I suppose we shall always go on studying it without ever getting to the end of it. We can no more give a full and final account of *Hamlet* than we can put the meaning of the open universe into a complete definition. Hamlet could not quite understand himself; there were heights and depths in his nature before which he often stood in terror, trembling like a guilty thing surprised. When I read certain criticisms of *Hamlet*, by which students attempt to 'explain' it, I am reminded of that scene with the recorders. Hamlet knows that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are spies set on him by the king to find out the secret of his strange behaviour. He borrows a recorder from the players, and says:—

Why do you go about to recover the wind of me, as if you would drive me into a toil?

Guil. O, my lord, if my duty is too bold, my love is too unmannerly.

Ham. I do not understand that. Will you play upon this pipe?

Guil. My lord, I cannot.

Ham. I pray you.

Guil. Believe me, I cannot.

Ham. I do beseech you.

Guil. I know no touch of it, my lord.

Ham. 'Tis as easy as lying: govern these vantages with your finger and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music. Look you, these are the stops.

Guil. But these I cannot command to any utterance of harmony; I have not the skill.

And then Hamlet's passion bursts out in those splendid words of indignation:—

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me; you would know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass: and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ; yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, yet you cannot play upon me.

That always seems to me a splendid reproof to those who think they have plucked the heart of its mystery out of this profound work of art.

2. THE MYSTERY OF GOD.

As we traverse the scenes of this play we feel that we tread haunted ground, and that the very air is heavy with supernatural terror.

The introduction of the Ghost has been objected to as touching the play with unreality; but this objection would

scarcely be felt at all by the spectators of the drama in Shakspeare's own day. And even in our own scientific age, unless we think that the mystery of life has been reduced to a difficult problem in mechanics, the appearance of the Ghost may well represent those mighty spiritual influences, those incalculable forces which sway the destinies of man. We are reminded of the Hand which wrote the words of judgment on the wall at Belshazzar's feast. At this hour of midnight, while Hamlet is waiting for the appearance of the spectre, the guilty king is carousing in his castle without one thought of the retribution which awaits him; the prince and his companions, as they pace the platform, can hear the cannon and trumpets 'bray out the triumph of the pledge' of the sensual monarch.

Behind the scenes of the outward world there are dread powers at work as strange and awful as this mysterious visitant who haunts the court of Denmark; and it is of these incalculable influences that Hamlet says:—

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

The course of history is no more at the mercy of the schemes and tricks of men, than the fate of Denmark could be decided by the criminal machinations of King Claudius. This fact of an Eternal Power overruling the plans and purposes of men is enforced with deepest emphasis in the Old Testament. With dramatic boldness the second Psalm represents the plots which evil-doers are devising on earth, while the Divine Ruler sits upon His throne and brings their wisdom to naught:—

Why do the nations rage,
And the people imagine a vain thing?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
And the rulers take counsel together
Against the Lord, and against His anointed, saying,

Let us break their bands asunder,
And cast away their cords from us.

And then what we often call 'the irony of events,' in the recoil of evil actions and the fall of rebellious pride, is brought out with a force that almost shocks our minds in the following verse :—

He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh :
The Lord shall have them in derision.

There is, then, in human life, a divine providence, an overruling destiny, a Power-not-ourselves,—call it by what name we will ; and in the teachings of no writer is this more profoundly recognised than in the plays of Shakspeare. On the deepest ground I would vindicate the introduction of the supernatural influence which saturates the scenes of *Hamlet*. The introduction of the Ghost is a triumph of genius, a splendid achievement of literary audacity. A lady once looked at a picture of Turner's, and said, 'Mr. Turner, I never saw a sunset like that ;' 'Don't you wish you could, madam ?' was the painter's answer. We never saw a ghost like this, but at least we may have such faith of imagination as to believe in this wonderful spirit, raised by the wand of a most potent magician. Madame de Staël said she did not believe in ghosts, but was terribly afraid of them ; and I think the most sceptical reader of this play feels something of Hamlet's terror that frosty night on the platform at Elsinore, face to face with the dread spectre of a murdered king. Many writers would never have dared to introduce the Ghost into the story ; and in its place they would have given us an introduction, explaining the ugly suspicions which infected the court of Denmark. An author afraid of ghosts would have given a tiresome description, which you would have felt inclined to skip. But Shakspeare was not afraid ; he knew that such a spirit

as he could raise would be far more real and impressive than a dry narration of events ; and so he makes the spectre of the murdered king come gliding on the platform, at the hour of midnight, to terrify the officers on guard, to shake his son's mind with a tale of guilt and horror, and to make visible before our very eyes the fears, suspicions and crimes which are working rottenness in the state of Denmark. As Hamlet said, 'O good Horatio, I'll take the Ghost's word for a thousand pound ;' so we will go on believing in Shakspeare's supernaturalism against all carping critics and supercilious unbelievers. There, in that spectral majesty of buried Denmark, we see the 'dead past' still alive, influencing the present and deciding the future.

This story of *Hamlet* has often been compared with the Greek legend of Orestes, who was compelled by Fate to avenge his father's murder by slaying with his own hand his guilty mother, and then was driven mad by the furies who attacked him as a matricide. It would be out of place here to show how in Shakspeare the Greek Fate becomes vitally transfigured into Divine Providence. In his plays we find the presence of that Power which men have always felt controlling the events of their history, which to the rebellious soul appears an implacable Judge, while to reverent obedience it is revealed as the beneficent Necessity, the eternal Righteousness, the everlasting God and Father.

This providential order of the world is recognised in the lines :—

Let us know,
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,
When our dear plots do pall ; and that should teach us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.

Hamlet is full of divinity ; it is a mirror of the moral order of the world. From the very first we are made to

feel that, by an inevitable law, the seeds of sin and weakness must bring forth a harvest of confusion and woe. Overshadowing all the actors, over against the exercise of human freedom, is this Power-not-ourselves. Hamlet shrinks from its behests; the king thinks to cheat and bribe its eternal laws; Polonius knows nothing of it in his diplomatic wisdom and political self-conceit; Ophelia is carried on its tide like a frail lily cast upon some impetuous cataract; the foolish gravediggers make merry with its ordination of mortality. But there the dread Power abides, overruling the whole, omnipotent in its force, triumphant in its vindication; or, as the old Hebrews would have said, the Lord sitteth in the heavens, He shall have pride and folly in derision, and the very wrath of men shall be made to praise Him. In the language of the ancient Greeks, *Hamlet* is the tragedy of Fate; or, in the language of spiritual religion, it is a drama of Eternal Providence.

3. THE TRAGEDY OF LIFE.

THE tragedy of this play is the conflict between inward freedom and outward circumstances. Hamlet's conscience is responsive to every call of duty; but he finds himself hemmed in by conditions and events with which he is incompetent to deal. Every time his will rises in obedience to the conviction 'I OUGHT,' the entanglement of the circumstances paralyses it with the confession 'I CANNOT.' Consider, briefly, the position in which this young prince finds himself at his entrance into the active world. His education is complete; he is come home from college a finished gentleman, a prince indeed, worthy in some future year to take the crown and rule the kingdom. With a fond mother, a most dear father, a loyal country, and the hope of kingship, what earthly lot could be happier than Hamlet's? In

the meantime he devotes himself to the studies he so much loves, and in quiet meditation and earnest thought he finds his most congenial occupation. All at once he is rudely wakened from this dream of security. Suddenly the scene is changed. The gracious world in which he has been living vanishes—his love blasted, his hopes destroyed, his deepest sensibilities grossly offended. His father dies suddenly, stung by an adder, it is said, while sleeping in his arbour. His ambitious uncle, taking advantage of Hamlet's inactivity and excess of grief, draws around him the creatures of the court, and seizes upon the crown. This is terrible; but worse is yet to come. He might naturally hope to find consolation in the love of his widowed mother, to mingle their tears, share their grief, and renew their memories of the dead. But even this natural comfort is denied him; for within a month of his father's funeral his mother becomes the wife of his ambitious uncle. Within a few weeks these calamities have burst upon this sensitive soul. He was quite unprepared for them. And we must remember that, before there comes one whisper of the appearance of the Ghost, Hamlet is thus convulsed by grief. It is a mistake to think it was only after the interview with his father's spirit that the young man's nature was shaken to its centre. The very first time we are alone with Hamlet, after the scene at court where the king and queen reprove him for excessive grief, we are let into his secret thoughts; we find he is heartbroken, and that his anguish is harder to bear because he has no one in whom he can confide. He crowns the sum of his woes by that cry of agony:—

But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue.

He wishes that with clear conscience he could put an end to all his sufferings by death:—

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew !
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter !

He is utterly weary of the world ; nothing will reconcile him to existence :—

O God ! God !
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world !
Fie on't ! ah fie ! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed ; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.

What touches him most keenly is that his own mother should have violated his father's memory :—

That it should come to this !
But two months dead : nay, not so much, not two.

In this first soliloquy it is also important to notice how his mother's conduct has made him lose faith in womanhood :—

Let me not think on't—*Frailty, thy name is woman !*

This woman, who had been so loving a wife, to whom her son had looked up as to a pattern of womanly and queenly character,—for her to fall so deep, so soon, was shocking. Hamlet was compelled to use the word 'mother' after it was emptied of its sacred meaning, and his habit of swift generalisation at once convicts all womanhood of his mother's guilt :—

Frailty, thy name is woman !

His father dead, the crown seized upon by his uncle, his mother hastily married to the usurper,—can there be worse than this ? Yes, it seems as though the utmost agony is to be piled upon this delicate soul, least capable of such a

burden. There comes to him a whispered rumour that his father's spirit haunts the city; the guards have seen the Ghost pacing the platform of the castle at the midnight hour. Then descends an avalanche of woe, and Hamlet hears the summons to a terrible task. The Ghost explains to him the unnatural murder which has been committed; the man who now wears the crown is the murderer of Hamlet's father, and, horrible to say, the husband of his mother. Before the spectre vanishes, Hamlet has recorded a solemn oath to neglect all other things, to make himself a minister of justice, to punish the royal criminal, and deliver the distracted nation from hateful tyranny. And, surely, every noble impulse must prompt him to undertake this solemn duty. A terrible crime has been committed against the majesty of the state and the sanctity of the family. The highest sanctions demand the exposure and punishment of the hideous deed. Hamlet is a *Prince*, and he is bound to defend the state against tyranny; he is a *Son*, and he must vindicate the sacredness of the family against unnatural crime. And yet, strange to say, he fails in this most solemn duty. Before the opportunity of action comes, his inner world of thought has time to assert its sway over the storm of emotion; ideal meditation, mental analysis, speculative thought, begin to overpower him; his will becomes paralysed; his executive power sinks into feebleness. A sensitive, cultured youth is called to deal with frightful events, which require unflinching purpose and swift activity. A poet is called no longer to meditation, but to deeds of terror. A soaring genius is placed in the midst of circumstances which make him shrink from the world of hateful facts into his own native region of pure ideas.

And we find how this revelation of crime and frailty filled him with doubts about himself. When those who are bound to us in closest relationship fall into sin, we can scarcely

help feeling a sense of guilt ourselves ; if we cannot trust *them*, how can we keep faith in our own stability? This frail woman is his mother, whose blood runs in his own veins ; this murderer is his father's brother ; on both sides of the family there seems to be the infection of moral poison. And what if he should find the evil working in his own nature ! If his seeming-virtuous mother has fallen, who knows but what he, too, may yield to some detestable sin ! This suspicion of himself comes out in those frightful words, in which he tries to terrify Ophelia against any thought of intermarriage with such an infected race, only fit to die out. Ophelia has been telling him that she did, indeed, once believe his profession of love ; and he answers :—

You should not have believed me ; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. . . . I am myself indifferent honest ; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me : I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven ? We are arrant knaves, all ; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery.

The man who speaks these words has looked down into a hell of crime and guilt, in which are involved those who share his blood, and it seems to his shuddering moral nature as though he shared their sins.

But though he speaks so bitterly, there can be no doubt that Hamlet really loved Ophelia ; and it was not till after the Ghost's revelation had swept away all hopes of happier things that his conduct towards her changed.

After his father's death and mother's marriage, he had often soothed his sorrows and forgotten his suspicions in the company of the innocent maiden ; but now all was changed in Hamlet's world. In spite of many wild words which have

made some critics doubt Hamlet's love to Ophelia, there are passages in the play which put the matter beyond dispute. At her grave, when he is exasperated by the empty rant of Laertes, and his deepest feelings pour forth without restraint, he cries :—

I loved Ophelia : forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.

And, then, there is that curious love-letter which Polonius gets from Ophelia to read to the king. This letter is sometimes quoted as certain evidence of Hamlet's insanity. I am sure that, between the lines, we can read the love and longing of Hamlet's heart. He begins in the high-flown, conventional style, calling her the 'beautified Ophelia' and his 'soul's idol;' then he quotes some love poetry; but at last, tired of this mechanical work, he writes out of his real feelings :—

O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers; I have not art to reckon my groans: but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. Adieu. Thine evermore, most dear lady.

Unless Hamlet was a gross deceiver, unworthy of our sympathy, those words express the true love of a distracted heart. And as it is important to understand Hamlet's character in this relation, we must study an earlier scene, in which Hamlet meets Ophelia after his interview with the Ghost. At the bidding of her old father, who doubts Hamlet's honesty, Ophelia has repulsed her lover, and given him to understand that their intercourse must cease. It may have been the very morning after the night of supernatural terror that he found her letter, saying that their engagement was at an end. Two such blows in succession are enough to distract him; in addition to all his weight of woe, Ophelia is faithless to her vows. He bears the separation

for some time, and tries to be resigned to his sad fate. But at last his misery becomes intolerable, and he resolves to learn from her own lips whether he may not rely upon her love, and find comfort in one woman's goodness. In agony of soul he hastens to her room, where the gentle lady sits sewing ; and this is the description of what occurred, told by Ophelia to Polonius :—

My lord, as I was sitting in my closet,
 Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced ;
 No hat upon his head ; his stockings foul'd,
 Ungarter'd, and down-gyved to his ankle ;
 Pale as his shirt ; his knees knocking each other ;
 And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors,—he comes before me.

* * * * *

He took me by the wrist and held me hard ;
 Then goes he to the length of all his arm
 And, with his other hand thus o'er his brow,
 He falls to such perusal of my face
 As he would draw it. Long stayed he so ;
 At last, a little shaking of mine arm,
 And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
 He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
 As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
 And end his being : that done, he lets me go :
 And, with his head over his shoulder turn'd,
 He seem'd to find his way without his eyes ;
 For out o' doors he went without their help,
 And, to the last, bended their light on me.

No wonder that he heaved that dreadful sigh and let her go. He came to find a love strong and brave, that would help him to bear his burden, relieve his terror, and make him feel that, at least, in one dear companion he had an anchorage in a sea of troubles, heaving with hidden crimes

and supernatural horrors. But when he looks into that sweet girlish face, he can see only the sudden fright of a timid heart, quite unequal to such an ugly secret as that locked up within his breast. He looks, and longs for one sign of sympathy; he can find nothing but terror and surprise; there is nothing to be said, he speaks no superfluous words; he leaves the room in despair, turning his piteous gaze upon her as he moves away, for it is a last look, it is his final parting with all that can reconcile him to life. Henceforth Ophelia must be as dead to him; he must keep that poor fluttering soul far removed from the brink of hell; he can never make her the bride of a man haunted by the Ghost of a murdered king. Their lives must separate; the dream of love is gone; henceforth he must hold his life in the service of those awful powers that track the guilty to their doom.

There is a fine contrast between this scene and one in *Julius Cæsar*, where Portia, the husband of Brutus, demands to know the meaning of her husband's restlessness, and reminds him how once she stabbed herself to make him understand how bravely she could endure pain. She says:—

You have some sick offence within your mind,
Which, by the right and virtue of my place,
I ought to know of: and, upon my knees,
I charm you, by my once commended beauty,
By all your vows of love and that great vow
Which did incorporate and make us one,
That you unfold to me, yourself, your half,
Why you are heavy.

* * * *

I grant I am a woman; but withal
A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife:
I grant I am a woman; but withal
A woman well-reputed, Cato's daughter.

Think you I am no stronger than my sex,
Being so father'd and so husbanded ?
Tell me your counsels, I will not disclose 'em :
I have made strong proof of my constancy,
Giving myself a voluntary wound
Here, in the thigh : can I bear that with patience,
And not my husband's secrets ?

Portia demands, as her right, to know her husband's secret and to share his burden ; but poor Ophelia is too frightened to ask Hamlet the meaning of his conduct. Instead of guessing there is some terrible burden she must help him to bear, she comes to the conclusion that the prince is mad, and panting with alarm, rushes off to her father, crying :—

O, my lord, I have been so affrighted !

At first it is rather natural that we should be offended by the bitter things Hamlet says to the gentle Ophelia. But do we not speak our bitterest words to those we love the most ? Is not an outraged affection capable of the most sweeping wrath ? In reading that passage quoted on page 127, in which Hamlet warns Ophelia against all thoughts of marriage with one so unworthy as himself, we must remember that he is giving a passionate account of the estimate which Polonius has already put upon his character. Her father has warned Ophelia that Hamlet is acting dishonourably towards her, and she so far yields to these suspicions as to return her lover's letters and refuse any further intercourse with him. But when the old courtier wants to entrap Hamlet into confession of his love, the compliant maiden agrees to draw the prince out by reproaching him for unkindness. Hamlet sees through the trick ; he feels that they are playing fast and loose with him ; and knowing that Polonius is listening, he demands indig-

nantly why Ophelia should try to win back the affections of a man who has been thought capable of deep-dyed treachery. 'If you are justified in your suspicions of me,' he seems to say, 'why do you then try to move me to confess my love? You have treated me as though I were an arrant knave; you had better, then, believe in me no more; rather than seek marriage with such an one, go your ways to a nunnery.' These emotions of righteous indignation, combined with the self-distrust which infects him, are ample justification for the apparent wildness and cruelty of the language which Hamlet speaks to Ophelia in hearing of the crafty courtier and the guilty king.

When Hamlet knows that Ophelia has yielded to those who doubt his honesty, when she repulses him because of her father's suspicion, when she sits with sweet hypocrisy reading her prayer-book to decoy him into confession to the king listening behind the arras to every word, when her lips tremble into that suave lie that her father is at home, while at that moment he is skulking in the corner,—no wonder, when these evidences of weakness shock his sensitive heart, that love turns to bitterness, and Hamlet pours out those cruel words against the falsehood and frailty of woman. Had Hamlet remained simply the cultured prince and heir to his father's throne, then, doubtless, Ophelia would have become his dear and honoured wife, fit companion for both home and court. But hell has opened at Hamlet's feet; 'the centre of an unatoned murder is beneath every spot' of earth he treads. He is the minister of wrath to bring sin to its appointed doom; he can see nothing in the future but cruel duties and frightful events; and so, at any cost, he must separate himself from all thoughts of union with a timid girl; for when the lightning strikes the oak woe to the frail ivy which has sheltered round its base.

4. THE HEROIC FAILURE.

THE visitation of the Ghost completely revolutionised Hamlet's world. Before that event he could only brood and mourn; with all his suspicions he was unable to take any action; though his heart broke he must not speak:—

But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue.

At last the midnight vision startles him out of brooding thought and private sorrow, and calls him to become a minister of retribution. This is the complication which makes the story of *Hamlet* so pitiful. The prince was made for thought rather than action; and *such* action as the punishment of unnatural crime seems impossible. On the field of battle Hamlet would have proved himself a dauntless soldier; but the tracking out of this secret villainy is utterly repugnant to him. He mourns his fate, and cries :—

The time is out of joint : O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right !

At one time he thinks to free himself from his difficulties by suicide; but even the thought of self-destruction has only the effect of starting his mind on speculations about the mysteries of death and immortality, and in wandering meditation he loses sight of the world of facts :—

To be, or not to be : that is the question :
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them ? To die : to sleep ;
No more ; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep : perchance to dream : ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause : there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life ;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin ? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of ?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all ;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.

Every time Hamlet begins to plan some scheme of action, the chariot of thought with its horses of fire snatches him away into the clouds, where the real world for the time is lost. It is instructive to mark the differences between *Macbeth* and *Othello* and this deeper tragedy of *Hamlet*. In *Macbeth* and *Othello* the action hurries on tumultuously to the close ; but here the plot is retarded, and slowly works its way, till of a sudden comes the final crash. The murder of Duncan is most abhorrent to the mind of Macbeth ; but the Witches' prophecy, incensing his fierce ambition, drives

him against all better thought to the deed of blood. The incantations of a witch are enough to make Macbeth rush into treason and murder ; the appearance of his injured father, the call of duty upon him as a man and a prince, are not enough to rouse the will of Hamlet to the instant punishment of treason and murder. One deep conviction of Desdemona's unfaithfulness, and Othello slays the woman he has vowed to love ; Hamlet has certain proof of his uncle's guilt, and yet he cannot brace his resolution to hurl the criminal from the throne. Macbeth and Othello, carried away by passion, precipitate the will into a torrent of activity ; Hamlet must study every circumstance and weigh every motive before he can decide on action. These are his own words, after he has watched the Norwegian army under Fortinbras depart on the expedition to Poland, to fight for 'a little patch of ground that hath no profit in it but the name' :—

How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge ! What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed ? a beast, no more.
Sure, He that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on the event,
A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward, I do not know
Why yet I live to say, *This thing's to do* ;
Sith I have cause and will and strength and means
To do't. Examples gross as earth exhort me :
Witness this army of such mass and charge
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd

Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal, and unsure
To all that fortune, death and danger dare,
Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep? while, to my shame, I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain?

In the play itself we have two striking contrasts to the character of Hamlet. In the scene from which I have just quoted, young Fortinbras, to snatch from Poland that worthless strip of land, raises an army, and is willing to sacrifice blood and treasure to vindicate his paltry claims. Young Laertes hears of the murder of his father Polonius, and in an ecstasy of rage gathers a crowd of rebellious Danes, and rushes sword in hand into the king's presence to have the death avenged. The tide of action rushes onward; while Hamlet lingers, hesitates, shrinks, and bemoans his grievous lot. Though he stands still, events are moving towards a catastrophe all the more horrible because of his indecision. Only one man in Denmark has opportunity to direct affairs aright, and to bring back justice and loyalty to the distracted realm; and the tragic *nodus* is found in the inadequacy of Hamlet to the task imposed.

At the same time we must remember the difficulty of the task and the entanglement of the circumstances. It is easy

to say that Hamlet *ought* to have avenged his father's murder. It is always easy to say that a certain thing ought to be done; but it is sometimes extremely hard to decide the best way of doing it. People who are very ready to cry, 'Really, you know, something ought to be done,' often have very little wisdom to counsel what is the very thing which must be done. We blame Hamlet for delay; but let us ask ourselves what we would have done in his place. How was Hamlet to bring about the punishment of the guilty king? The fawning courtiers had given in their allegiance to him as soon as he had seized upon the crown; and they had even connived at his hasty marriage with the widowed queen. Suppose Hamlet had openly accused Claudius; when asked for evidence of the crime, he could only have spoken of his own suspicion, and told the incredible story of the appearance of his father's spirit. Ought he to have yielded to the impulse of revenge and slain his uncle with his own hand? But what would that have availed? He would only have been arrested for treason, and denounced as the unnatural murderer of his mother's husband. For there was the fact of his mother's complicity; and the Ghost had bidden him contrive nothing against the queen, though every plan of vengeance must have involved her in grief and shame. We must not blame Hamlet too much in the midst of complicated circumstances like these. Another man might have cut through the ravelled knot which Hamlet failed to unloose; and doubtless a rough-and-ready settlement of the problem would have been better than letting things work together for evil. But such a settlement Hamlet could not effect; he was unable to decide the best way to discharge his task. For many duties Hamlet would have been ready with joyful obedience; but the dark angel of vengeance had laid upon him the work of tracking crime,

and under the burden of that call he writhed in torture, hesitated in doubt, and sank into remorse.

In trying to account for Hamlet's conduct, some critics have settled the problem by voting him a madman. They are in bad company, for that was exactly the explanation which Polonius gave of his strange behaviour. What I admire in Hamlet is the self-control by which he proves his sanity amidst events sufficient to drive many a man to madness. I do not believe that Hamlet was mad, or that he pretended to be mad. When he comes away from his first interview with the Ghost, he is filled with distraction and dismay. After such a revelation who can wonder that his whole nature is shaken? He wants to be alone; but he hears Horatio and Bernardo calling him. How shall he meet them? What shall he say to them? He is afraid they will notice his distraction, and demand to be told his secret. So he tries to stifle his horror, and in the effort to control himself he becomes half hysterical. With ill-assumed flighty humorousness he talks at random, and baffles their eager curiosity with 'wild and whirling words.' But, beneath all this flightiness, his intellect is at work. These broken words and disjointed utterances are only the sparks of an electric current of deep emotion which is polarising his inmost soul. There is not a trace of 'madness' in all this; for notice with what keen foresight he grasps the fact that his life is convulsed by the events of that dreadful night. He finds it difficult to compose his mind sufficiently to meet these two friends; then he remembers he has to go back to the world again; he must return to the court with its miserable conventionalities, and take his part in it while his mind is haunted by this horrid secret. He knows he is changed, and that he cannot hide the change; not all his self-control will keep those around him from noticing the transformation; he fears that this will lead to all kinds

of suspicious prying and peepings before he can resolve on his plan of action. To avoid a premature disclosure he demands an oath from his friends that they will not divulge his secret. He bids them make no curious remarks about the cause of the change in his conduct :—

How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself,
As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on.

He can scarcely trust himself in society, and so resolves to turn aside dangerous inquiries by equivocal expressions and flighty nonsense ; by satire and irony he will protect himself from betrayal, and keep a kind of privacy even in the midst of a crowded court. In the course of the story you find that only those who have no suspicion of the secret consider that he is mad. Horatio, who knows everything, never for a moment doubts his friend's sanity. The king has a guilty consciousness throughout that Hamlet has discovered the cause of his father's death. We cannot, indeed, be surprised, in that dreadful chamber scene, when Hamlet stands transfixed before the reproachful Ghost, that the queen, to whom the spirit is invisible, should cry, 'Alas, he's mad !' After he has unfolded to his mother the agony of his soul, he begins to fear the frightened woman will rush off to her husband and tell him everything. *That* would entirely frustrate his designs,—to have the king made aware that his strange behaviour is the disguise of a crafty revenge for direful wrongs. In this way we can understand the words, of which so much has been made, in which Hamlet cautions his mother. She has pronounced him 'mad,' and yet has discovered that he has deep suspicions of crime ; and taking her at her own words, he bids her by no means let the 'bloat king' tempt her to

ravel all this matter out,
That I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft.

In reading this play I am impressed with Hamlet's intellectual power. I admire Hamlet because, though face to face with supernatural terrors, and surrounded by royal criminals, false friends, stupid bores and tormenting spies, he yet to the hour of his death kept his faith firm and his mind clear.

While there was no 'madness' in Hamlet, yet doubtless there was a defect in his nature, which accounts for much of his conduct. This defect arose from excess of abstract thought, and the consequent incapacity at certain times for resolved and concentrated activity. His world of thought to him was a great reality, and the outer world of noise and movement, business and fashion, often appeared like a vain show and an empty dream. It has often been remarked by wise men that the world becomes real to us only in degree as we make ourselves part and parcel of its activity. When we contend with its forces, utilise its laws, and bend our energies for the achievement of some purpose, especially when we bind ourselves to our fellow-men in love and service,—then the world of things without becomes as real as the world of thoughts within. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Nathaniel Hawthorne tells us of a poor, wretched, dreaming man, whose world was created for him by the presence of one bright, loving maiden: 'She was real. Holding her hand you felt something; a tender something; a substance, and a warm one; and so long as you could feel its grasp, soft as it was, you might be certain that your place was good in the whole sympathetic chain of human nature. The world was no longer a delusion.' And a great American poet has the same thought:—

Of the terrible doubt of appearances,
Of the uncertainty, after all, that we may be deluded,
That may-be reliance and hope are but speculations after all,
That may-be identity beyond the grave is a beautiful fable only.

To me, these, and the like of these, are curiously answered by
my lovers, my dear friends ;
When he whom I love travels with me, or sits a long while
holding me by the hand,
Then I am charmed with untold and untellable wisdom—I am
silent—I require nothing further.
I cannot answer the question of appearances, or that of identity
beyond the grave ;
But I walk or sit indifferent—I am satisfied,
He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me.

But to Hamlet there was very little of such satisfaction ;
only in the friendship of Horatio—‘ more an antique Roman
than a Dane ’—could Hamlet steady his bewildered mind,
as the world around seemed dissolving into chaos. Hamlet’s
metaphysical state of mind was intensified by events. A
ghost becomes the most real object in his world, and other
things appear cheats and shams. This king is a dressed-up
murderer ; this queen a most frail woman ; these politicians
are rogues, who by their tricks would ‘ circumvent God ; ’
these courtiers are gilded waterflies who bask in the sun-
shine of favour and flattery ; and even the fair Ophelia
cannot be true to her own heart, she will be a decoy to trip
him into exposure, will repulse his love, play the hypocrite,
and tell pretty lies to him in trembling compliance to
others. Surrounded by shams, he longs to explode the
miserable world by a burst of fierce irony and passionate
contempt. Sometimes we feel tempted to do the same,
when we are sick at heart of the empty forms and foolish
fashions by which men and women make their lives so false.
We long to speak a rude word of truth to explode the mas-

querade and shock the people out of their vain proprieties. And as we exercise strong self-control to keep our passions down, in the restraint of soul we say: 'If I were to speak that one word of naked truth, these people would think me mad!' Hamlet spoke that word. Courtiers like Polonius and Osric voted him a madman, and modern critics have been found to accept their verdict.

This defect of which I have spoken in Hamlet's character results in a continual postponement of solemn duty. I think Hamlet never comes nearer to madness than when he torments himself with neglect of his task. The worst apparition is the ghost of a neglected duty. How we madden ourselves with our postponements! Little neglected duties accumulate into a mountain which shadows our life with terror. An unwritten letter remains unwritten so long that it seems impossible to write it. The work would be easy if only we would set about it at once; but the omitted task is like a nightmare when we sleep, and like a secret aching pain when we awake. The thought of the things we have left undone is often more maddening than the reproach of the sins we have committed. It is pitiable to read the words in which Hamlet pours contempt and scorn upon himself for his postponements. Every event reminds him of his delay,—the recitation of his part by an actor, and the departure to battle of an army; everybody is doing his work except himself; even criminals are more strenuous for evil than he can be for justice; all occasions inform against him and reproach him for his failure. He begins to see how the evil grows and spreads, while his own will is still puzzled and his power paralysed.

And yet this man, who so deeply doubts himself, never really doubts the supremacy of truth and righteousness; he never loses sight of eternal realities. When tempted to suicide, he bows to the divine law, as he remembers how

the Almighty has 'fixed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter ;' he feels that though it were *easier* to sink from a troubled life into the sleep of death, yet it is *nobler* in the mind to suffer all woes than end them by cowardly self-destruction. It is remarkable how in his deepest despair he yet recognises the grandeur of Nature and the majesty of Man, even though they no longer delight him :—

I have of late (but wherefore, I know not) lost all my mirth, foregone all custom of exercises ; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man ! how noble in reason ! how infinite in faculty ! in form and moving how express and admirable ! in action how like an angel ! in apprehension how like a god ! the beauty of the world ! the paragon of animals ! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust ? man delights not me : no, nor woman neither.

Though the clouds of the fatal storm gather fierce and dark, he proclaims his faith in Providence, and his readiness to abide the end. His mind is clear, his conscience quick ; if his arm has not been able to wield the sword of justice, yet he has never bowed to falsehood or curried favour with successful wrong ; never once has he entertained a thought of making concessions to the guilty king, or of coming to a compromise with triumphant crime. Before the final catastrophe Hamlet has a presentiment that his life is ending in failure ; he says to Horatio :—

Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart.

Horatio would not have him fence with Laertes if his mind misgives him :—

If your mind dislike anything, obey it: I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit.

And the answer shows the courage and fidelity and trust of this noble prince :—

We defy augury : there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come ; if it be not to come, it will be now ; if it be not now, yet it will come : *the readiness is all.*

He felt the failure of his life darkening into total eclipse. Yet Hamlet's failure was nobler than many a brilliant success. He had never refused the call of duty ; he had struggled to bear a burden so great that it crushed him beneath the load ; he had accepted the cross, though he could only totter under it until he stumbled into the darkness of death. He never tried to excuse himself or palliate his weakness. If he failed, his self-reproach was bitter and his repentance deep. We must judge this man not by what he failed to do, but by what he agonised to perform. As Heine says : 'It is not merely what we have done, not merely the posthumous fruit of our activity that entitles us to honourable recognition after death, but also our striving itself, and especially our unsuccessful striving,—the shipwrecked, fruitless, but great-souled WILL to do.'

In the end, the prince, at the moment of death, avenges his father's murder. In the path through which we have followed him, we trace the victims of the tragedy : old Polonius rashly killed ; Ophelia driven to madness and the grave ; while Hamlet, the son of a murdered father, stands himself charged with the murder of the father of his dead lover and his alienated friend. After these auguries of doom, we have the frightful close : the queen poisoned ; Laertes slain as the result of his own treachery ; Hamlet with the venom working in his blood. Then, at last, with all this train of grief behind, surrounded by a scene of death, Hamlet's will rises into one

supreme action, and he slays the wretched king from whose crime this harvest of sin and suffering has grown. The end was inevitable. Shakspeare did not *invent* it. A manufactured story would have had a climax like the conclusion of many a popular novel,—the king would have been slain and Hamlet saved alive; the queen condemned to shame, and Ophelia spared to take her place with her husband upon the throne of Denmark. But Shakspeare did not manufacture; he *created*. His plays are not wilful and accidental, they are natural and inevitable as solar system and tidal wave. He knew that the genius of the world does not distribute with an exact discrimination external rewards and punishments to favour virtue and discourage vice; to him the moral order of the world was found in that resistless *tendency* which is for ever eliminating evil and evolving nobler conditions out of the waste and failure of sin and death. And so, in this play, the old era must end; crime has worked out its own destruction; the old generation is outworn; a new age must arise to redress the wrongs of mankind and restore peace and order to the world. With consummate wisdom, Shakspeare makes the expiring Hamlet nominate the vigorous Fortinbras to the vacant throne. The *Hamlet* of the stage ends with the death of the prince; but Shakspeare's play does not close in such unmitigated gloom. Through the thick darkness there flashes a ray of creative light; as old things pass away we can see the dawn of a new heaven and a new earth in which all things shall be made new. While we are lamenting the past with its heap of slain, already young Fortinbras comes in, flushed with victory, possessed of courage, will, and strength to become an instrument of the Eternal Providence that even out of crime, ruin and death is able to bring forth new worlds of light and life. The culmination of *Hamlet* is not only the tragedy of Fate; it is also the triumph of God.

VI.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.'—JESUS.

[This charming play belongs to Shakspeare's Second Period. Its probable date of production is 1596, though it was not published till 1600.

We have evidence of the existence of an older play, containing the incidents of the caskets and the pound of flesh; but these had also been related in prose and verse in various tongues for many centuries before the time of Shakspeare. There is wonderful artistic skill in the subtile blending of the three stories of Shylock and his bond, Portia and her marriage, and the elopement of Jessica with Lorenzo.]

I. PORTIA.

IN this play we meet with one of the most fascinating of Shakspeare's heroines. The poet throughout his writings displays the most wonderful knowledge of woman's character. He seems to understand every secret. The trembling impulse of earliest passion within a maiden's breast, the perfect love that gives itself without reserve to the beloved, the savage eagerness with which an angry mother can defend her outraged child, the awful glance of insulted chastity which strikes the impure soul like a bolt from heaven, the playful spirit and scintillating wit which disguise a deep and strong affection, the simple loves and jealousies of a shepherd girl, and the dazzling fascinations of a splendid queen,—all these are familiar to Shakspeare as the notes of

his instrument to a skilful musician. These heroines are not manufactured out of moral qualities patched together; the qualities are the inevitable outcome of living characters, grasped in their unique completeness by the genius of the poet. The true artist does not say, 'Now, I have these half-dozen colours on my palette, and I must arrange them as best I can harmoniously on the canvas;' he becomes inspired by some vision which he is under a necessity to express, and pencil, colours, skilful fingers, all become the instruments of the divine idea which fills his soul. And that was the method of Shakspeare's art. He did not say, 'Here are these moral qualities, and I must invent women for their illustration.' He first *saw* his heroines; he knew them as well as he did his own wife and daughters; he knew the colour of their hair, the expression of their eyes, the shape of their mouths, their fashion of dress, the favourite shade of their ribbons. There these women are in their inviolate personalities; they are not put there in order to work the machinery of an artificial plot, but the plot unfolds itself out of their essential characters by a law inevitable as that by which the world proceeded from the thought of God. As we study these plays, we find how this supreme poet, perhaps the man of finest intellect the world has seen, honours and reverences womanhood, glorifies chastity, maintains the inviolability of marriage, and holds that the greatness of the woman is needed for the completeness of the man. The study of Shakspeare confirms the saying of the American poet:—

And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man.

And I say there is nothing greater than to be the mother of men.

The heroine of *The Merchant of Venice* is almost like a personal friend, we seem to know her so well. We are familiar with every wave of her golden hair, every play of

those beautiful features, every movement of that proud head, every glance of those piercing eyes incapable of hesitation or obliquity. We have marked every sudden change of quick expression by which her words try to keep pace with her rapid thoughts. Her brilliant intellect, genial humour, keen irony, loyal faith, passionate love, quick sympathy, and intuitional discernment,—all these aspects of her nature we have learnt from the utterances ascribed to her in the various events of the unfolding plot.

We first see Portia as the splendid heiress in her mansion at Belmont, and we are sure how well her household was governed. A privilege it must have been to serve such a gracious mistress ; and yet we are sure that under her rule there was no laxity, deception, or persistent carelessness. This is the faithful daughter, who will not violate her father's will even to secure the man she loves ; this is the self-forgetful bride, who parts with her husband on the marriage morning to save his friend from death ; this is the perfect wife, who gives herself and all her wealth without reserve into the keeping of her lord. This woman, who claimed the lawyer's cap and gown by the divine right of her genius, was already the wise lawgiver of the household, the faithful steward of her dead father's wealth, and the strict executor of his will. In Portia Shakspeare seems resolved to show how woman can do so many different things and yet maintain her perfect womanliness. Bassanio will never blush when it becomes publicly reported that his wife was the lawyer who saved Antonio's life. Here we are taught the resources of woman's nature and the versatility of her genius ; she can adapt herself to every sudden change of circumstance, and prove herself equal to every unexpected emergency. With piercing intuition she sees through all the intricacies of a difficult case, unravels the knot of involved events, knows just what ought to be done, and

does it. A woman very often does the right thing without being able to elaborate the reasons and motives ; her actions result not from logical conviction, but from moral inspiration ; she can concentrate her whole nature upon the deed she feels is right ; as soon as her genius realises the intuition of duty, instantly her will resolves itself into activity. The wisdom of a true-hearted woman is not the mechanical conclusion of a syllogism, but the spontaneous offspring of her own pure and beautiful soul. All through these plays Shakspeare brings out the intuitional power of his women ; they understand the men around them better than the men understand one another. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* Julia refuses to explain why she holds such an opinion of a certain man ; if she had ventured to discuss the matter, she would most likely have had the worst of the argument ; but she knows better than that, and wisely says :—

I have no other but a woman's reason :
I think him so, because I think him so.

She has reached her instinctive verdict without the intermediate process of logical argument and dialectical machinery. Shakspeare's heroines teach us much profound philosophy, though they never philosophise ; they are wise and strong, and yet they are neither blue-stockings nor Amazons. This splendid lady of Belmont is an obedient daughter and a faithful wife. And we must remember the temptation Portia is under to break her father's dying command. Her father has left her the uncontrolled mistress of all his wealth ; but he seems to have fettered her will just in the very matter whose happy issue depends on her liberty of choice. I do not wonder that the first entrance of Portia is ushered by a heavy sigh :—

By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is awcary of this great world.

By her father's will Portia has no power of choice or refusal in the selection of a husband. She is a young, beautiful, amiable, accomplished lady, possessed of boundless wealth; and her wise father knew the danger she would encounter from needy adventurers, who would come with specious words and gallant manners to sue for her hand; he knew how rare a husband was needed to be worthy of such a wife. So he provided that after his death the character of every suitor should be put to a test as severe as he would have had to undergo during the father's lifetime. Three caskets are provided, of gold, silver, and lead; one of these contains the portrait of Portia, and whoever chooses this the lady is bound to accept as her husband. No wonder, with a crowd of suitors at her gate, amongst whom she can neither choose nor dismiss, with her fate hanging in the balance, that Portia's little body is awearry of the great world; and though we know that she reverences her father's memory, we are not astonished that she frets somewhat under the pressure of the dead hand, and cries:—

O me, the word 'Choose!' I may neither choose whom I would, nor refuse whom I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none?

And Nerissa lets us into Shakspeare's secret when she answers:—

Your father was ever virtuous; and holy men at their death have good inspirations: therefore the lottery, that he hath devised in these three caskets of gold, silver, and lead, *whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you*, will, no doubt, never be chosen by any rightly but one who shall rightly love.

Therefore the lottery of marriage is not all a lottery; the device is a test of character; he who can see through the

father's meaning will prove himself worthy of the daughter. This is an example of what I may call the beautiful conservatism of Shakspeare; he always emphasises reverence for sacred traditions and loyalty to wise authority. These three caskets are the dramatic representation of parental authority and social law. Regarded literally, the device of the caskets may seem absurd, just as the introduction of the Ghost in *Hamlet* may shock feelings of probability; but the exigencies of the drama compel the introduction of symbolic representations of the circumstances of the story. Instead of a long description of Portia's education, the conditions of her father's will, and the provisions for his daughter's marriage, which would have been narrated in a modern novel, Shakspeare draws the curtain, shows us the three caskets with the troop of suitors coming to try their fate, and in a single picture the whole story is told. Here we have an impressive symbol of the social limitations of woman in important crises of her career. Portia must answer to all her suitors, 'You must guess my father's meaning in these caskets.' Portia has made her secret choice, but parental authority and social custom prevent her lips from becoming the herald of her heart. She can only receive as her husband the man who shall choose the right casket. There the caskets stand as a protection between Portia and the crowd of suitors, and also as a barrier between her and the man she loves; they are the symbols of that social custom which limits woman in the decision of her fate. Portia longs to choose herself; her impulse is to put her hand in Bassanio's, and say, 'I am yours for ever;' but this is her decision:—

If I live as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana, unless
I be obtained by the manner of my father's will.

And it is clear that Shakspeare thoroughly sympathised with that brave resolution. He seems to say: These social laws

do, indeed, sometimes clash with personal inclination and impetuous passion ; a hot temper feels impelled to leap over a cold decree ; yet these laws must not lightly be disregarded ; if they fetter a woman's action, they protect her modesty and preserve the bloom and beauty of her maidenhood. If passion seems impelling, yet filial reverence and social bonds must have their influence, and impulse must never be allowed to tarnish the pure modesty of her nature. Portia feels that duty is somewhat strange and harsh, but she has faith to believe it will prove the best ; she is so convinced that there is a supreme meaning to be revealed in her life, that she dare not allow caprice or whim to thwart the working of the higher law. And we admire Portia's self-restraint the more because we know the passion which sways her soul ; no one knows better the difficulty of reconciling wilful impulse with the laws of reason. She says to Nerissa :—

If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces. It is a good divine that follows his own instructions : I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree : such a hare is madness the youth, to skip o'er the meshes of good counsel the cripple.

No man will Portia accept who cannot find out her father's meaning ; but can there be any harm in helping the right man to find it ? No man may speak of love until he has chosen the right casket ; but the language of love is thousandfold ; how can it be hid when a glance is able to reveal all its secret ? The daughter's mind is so saturated with the father's purpose, that the letter of the law is almost dissolved by the outpouring of the spirit.

We must not think that this immaculate lady, with her virtuous resolution and unshaken obedience, is not deeply swayed by passion for the man she loves. Portia is not a Stoic; the brain beneath that lawyer's cap has learnt its wisdom from her heart, and the heart within that gown throbs to as strong and pure a love as ever fired a woman's soul. In the first scene of the play, before we are introduced to Portia, Bassanio lets us into the secret, as he describes a visit he once paid to Belmont, when he first felt sure of his lady's love, because, he says,

Sometimes from her eyes
I did receive fair speechless messages.

Portia need not so much complain that

Yet a maiden hath no tongue but thought.

Those speechless messages of her eyes are a most potent element in the lottery; they have taught Bassanio the deep truth in the inscription on the leaden casket: *Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.* To prove himself worthy of such a wife, a man must renounce claims of personal desert and desires of selfish gain, and make his marriage a complete surrender and an unreserved gift of love. Bassanio comes to try his fate; and we have that matchless scene before the choice, when the lovers tremble in eager anxiety to know the issue. Portia entreats him to postpone his choice:—

I pray you, tarry: pause a day or two
Before you hazard; for, in choosing wrong,
I lose your company: therefore forbear a while.
There's something tells me, but it is not love,
I would not lose you; and you know yourself,
Hate counsels not in such a quality.

But lest you should not understand me well,—
And yet a maiden hath no tongue but thought,—
I would detain you here some month or two
Before you venture for me. I could teach you
How to choose right, but then I am forsworn;
So will I never be: so may you miss me;
But if you do, you'll make me wish a sin,
That I had been forsworn. Beshrew your eyes,
They have o'erlook'd me, and divided me;
One half of me is yours, the other half yours,
Mine own, I would say; but if mine, then yours,
And so all yours. O, these naughty times
Put bars between the owners and their rights!
And so, though yours, not yours. Prove it so,
Let fortune go to hell for it, not I.
I speak too long; but 'tis to peize the time,
To eke it and to draw it out in length,
To stay you from election.

To which Bassanio cries:—

Let me choose;
For as I am, I live upon the rack.

Then the curtains are drawn, and the caskets discovered.
As Bassanio approaches, Portia says there must be music:—

Let music sound while he doth make his choice;
Then, if he lose, he makes a swan-like end,
Fading in music: that the comparison
May stand more proper, my eye shall be the stream
And watery death-bed for him. He may win;
And what is music then? Then music is
Even as the flourish when true subjects bow
To a new-crowned monarch: such it is
As are those dulcet sounds in break of day
That creep into the dreaming bridegroom's ear
And summon him to marriage.

But did Portia choose the song to which the music went? If not, there was a coincidence most strange. With that song sounding in his ears, Bassanio could scarcely help finding out the meaning of the three caskets. In reading the song we must remember that 'fancy' means a superficial sentiment that judges by appearances:—

Tell me where is fancy bred,
Or in the heart or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?
Reply, reply.
It is engendered in the eyes,
With gazing fed; and fancy dies
In the cradle where it lies.
Let us all ring fancy's knell:
I'll begin it,—Ding, dong, bell.

Yes! 'Ding, dong, bell' to the passing fancy which has made the superficial suitors choose the glittering gold and silver. Here is the true man come at last, whose eye will not be caught by a fine outside, but will read the father's meaning in that dull leaden casket, and find within it the portrait of his lovely bride.

While the choice was in process, the lady was almost dissolved in passionate emotion. To-morrow this intellectual woman will stand in the Court of Venice to expound the law of mercy; to-day this passionate bride is absorbed in an ecstasy of love. Listen to the throbbings of her heart as she watches Bassanio refuse the gold and silver, and lay his hand upon the lead:—

How all the other passions fleet to air,
As doubtful thoughts, and rash-embraced despair,
And shudd'ring fear, and green-eyed jealousy!
O love,
Be moderate; allay thy ecstasy;
In measure rein thy joy; scant this excess.

I feel too much thy blessing: make it less,
For fear I surfeit!

And now, when every obstacle is removed, Portia gives herself away. In Shakspeare's plays marriage is a mutual gift. On the leaden casket was written, *Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath*; and on her part Portia's acceptance of her lover was not a sentimental compliance or a simpered 'Yes,' but a supreme surrender:—

You see me, lord Bassanio, where I stand,
Such as I am: though for myself alone
I would not be ambitious in my wish,
To wish myself much better; yet for you
I would be trebled twenty times myself;
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times
More rich;
That only to stand high in your account,
I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends,
Exceed account; but the full sum of me
Is sum of something, which, to term in gross,
Is an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractised;
Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn; happier than this,
She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
Happiest of all is that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed,
As from her lord, her governor, her king.
Myself and what is mine to you and yours
Is now converted: but now I was the lord
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
This house, these servants and this same myself
Are yours, my lord.

What a rebuke is this scene to the wretched haggling about *mine* and *thine*, which so often brings the meannesses of commerce into the sanctities of love! As Bassanio's fondest

hopes are realised, we feel, with Jessica, that such blessedness pledges him to a noble life :—

It is very meet
The Lord Bassanio live an upright life ;
For, having such a blessing in his lady,
He finds the joys of heaven here on earth ;
And if on earth he do not merit it, then
In reason he should never come to heaven.

In the midst of this rapture, Portia's intellect at once asserts itself in the dreadful emergency which arises. Messengers come to say that Antonio's ships are wrecked, and Shylock is demanding his pound of flesh. In an instant the storm of passion abates ; Portia is calm and collected, takes in every circumstance, sees into the heart of the problem, knows what ought to be done, tells no one, asks no one's advice, but goes and does it. How she might have lashed Bassanio for daring to come to seek her hand by means of a bond that endangered the life of his friend ; but there is not one word of that ; trial and pain only bring out the best elements of this woman's nature. For some time, as she listens to the tidings, her brain is too busy for words. At length she speaks ; and how crisp and businesslike are these sentences from lips which a moment before were burning with the fire of love ! All that strength of passion is concentrated into clearest decision and boldest resolution :—

Is it your dear friend that is thus in trouble ?
What sum owes he the Jew ?

And when she hears of the three thousand ducats, she exclaims :—

What, no more ?
Pay him six thousand and deface the bond.

But she can scent deeper mischief in this business ; she cannot leave so serious a matter with these grief-stricken friends, or the cool, matter-of-fact lawyers of the court. This is an emergency which needs both the keen judgment and compassionate heart, which only a woman can sufficiently combine. Not now is her little body weary of the great world. Work is to be done, a precious life is at stake, and she is away to Venice. The tide of events sweeps by, and we find Portia standing, in the midst of the bewildered court, face to face with Shylock, pleading first for mercy with matchless eloquence, and then pronouncing sentence with unflinching justice. Nowhere will you find a bolder affirmation of woman's greatness,—the infinite depth of her passion, the clear insight of her intellect, the fertility of her resources, the decision of her will, the divine tenderness of her mercy, the sweeping whirlwind of her righteous indignation against cruelty and crime. That is the climax, worthy of Shakspeare's genius, to bring together these two marvellous creations : SHYLOCK, cruel, treacherous, bloodthirsty ; PORTIA, a perfect woman, the keenness of whose judgment is only matched by the passion and purity of her love.

2. SHYLOCK.

SHYLOCK is one of the most wonderful of Shakspeare's creations. I remember once being startled by this bold assertion : 'Great artists have positively created new individualities—or at least gone to the verge of creating them. If the idea of an imaginary living creature were perfectly sufficient and self-consistent, it would actually live.' When I read those striking words, I instantly thought of Shylock ; for his character is so vitally organic, so 'perfectly sufficient and self-consistent,' that it seems difficult to believe that

he never actually lived. And, indeed, there is a sense in which he did actually live. He is the very personification of the Jew of the middle ages ; in him we see the result of centuries of cruelty, hatred, and persecution. We not only condemn Shylock, we also feel a solemn pity for the man who lives under the burden of an ancient curse. In this play Shakspeare passes a severe judgment on that so-called Christianity which had treated the Jews not only as unbelievers, but as aliens to the human commonwealth ; he shows the evil results of intolerance ; how the force of religion when used for sectarian ends rouses the fiercest hatred and the most intolerable cruelty. Shylock, in his thirst for Christian blood, is not merely gratifying personal hatred ; he is seeking to avenge the wrongs of his race. In the third scene of the first act, when he sees Antonio approaching, he says to himself :—

How like a fawning publican he looks !
I hate him for he is a Christian,
But more for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
If I can catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
He hates our sacred nation, and he rails,
Even there where merchants most do congregate,
On me, my bargains and my well-won thrift,
Which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe,
If I forgive him !

All the bitter feuds of generations are concentrated in the fierce hatred which has well-nigh dehumanised this man's nature. The only relations he will sustain to his Christian neighbours are those which help to satisfy his greed. In social life and religious worship he regards them as belong-

ing to an unclean race. When Bassanio asks him to dine with him, he bursts into the words of fierce contempt and scorn :—

Yes, to smell pork ; to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into. I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following, but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you.

And yet this man, much as he hates a Christian, feels bitterly his inhuman treatment and the isolation to which he is condemned. His deep hatred is proof of the bonds of humanity by which he is indissolubly related to his persecutors. There is a passage which illustrates this in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* : 'In vain thou deniest it, thou *art* my Brother. Thy very Hatred, thy very Envy, those foolish Lies thou tellest of me in thy splenetic humour : what is all this but an inverted sympathy? Were I a Steam-engine, wouldst thou take the trouble to tell lies of me? Not thou ! I should grind all unheeded, whether badly or well. Wondrous truly are the bonds that unite us one and all ; whether by the soft binding of Love, or the iron chaining of Necessity, as we like to choose it.' The following words of Shylock show us that his hatred is an 'inverted sympathy,' that it is persistent persecution which has converted the religion of humanity into the energy of demoniac rage :—

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes ? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions ? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is ? If you prick us, do we not bleed ? if you tickle us, do we not laugh ? if you poison us, do we not die ? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge ? if we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If

a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

In the character of Antonio, Shakspeare shows us how the evils of persecution react upon the persecutors themselves. Antonio is almost a perfect man, except wherein his nature has become demoralised by religious antipathy. Over and over again in this play, we find how the merchant is beloved by those who know him best. Salarino says of him :—

A kinder gentleman treads not the earth.

Salanio cannot find words to express his worth :—

The good Antonio, the honest Antonio—O that I had a title good enough to keep his name company.

Bassanio speaks of him as :—

The dearest friend to me, the kindest man,
The best conditioned and unwearièd spirit
In doing courtesies ; and one in whom
The ancient Roman honour more appears,
Than any that draws breath in Italy.

And there is a hint of Bassanio's tender regard for his friend in their conversation in the first act. Antonio is filled with sorrow because he knows that his friend's marriage will put an end to the close friendship that has been the best part of his life. And so Bassanio, with fine delicacy, says as little as possible about his passionate love for Portia, but talks as though the marriage with the heiress was a convenient means of bettering his broken fortunes. Rather than grieve his dear friend he is willing to appear

somewhat mercenary. In this way, both by plain words and subtile inferences, Shakspeare gives us a very high estimate of the nobility and beauty of Antonio's character ; so that the contrast is all the more startling when we find how he has treated Shylock with systematic hatred.

After being told that 'a kinder gentleman treads not the earth,' it is a strange contrast which Shylock gives us in this passage :—

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances :
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.
Well then, it now appears you need my help .
Go to, then ; you come to me, and you say
Shylock, we would have moneys : You say so ;
You, that did void your rheum upon my beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold : moneys is your suit.
What should I say to you ? Should I not say,
Hath a dog money ? is it possible,
A cur can lend three thousand ducats ? Or
Shall I bend low and in a bondman's key,
With bated breath and whispering humbleness,
Say this ;
Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last ;
You spurn'd me such a day ; another time
You call'd me dog ; and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much moneys.

And Antonio never denies the correctness of the Jew's impeachment, never expresses the slightest regret for his conduct ; indeed, it is most likely that he will continue to

commit the same indignities. This is his cool, contemptuous reply :—

I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.
If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends ; for when did friendship take
A breed for barren metal of his friend ?
But lend it rather to thine enemy,
Who, if he break, thou may'st with better face
Exact the penalty.

When Shylock demands his pound of flesh we must remember that he knows nothing of Antonio as the loving friend and courteous gentleman, and only thinks of him as the rude blasphemer and cruel persecutor.

It is noteworthy that at the very time when he hears of Antonio's failure, Shylock's rage is incensed by the flight of his daughter, Jessica, who not only flees his house, but robs him of his gold and jewels. There need be no attempt to justify the unfilial conduct of Jessica ; but, at the same time, we must remember the terrible temptation the maiden was under to escape from a parent she despised and a home which she declares to be 'a hell.' We hear of no mother to touch the girl's mind with a sense of the duties of daughterhood, and even the merry servant, Launcelot, who lightened the house 'of some taste of tediousness,' is leaving because he finds the service of the Jew insufferable. We cannot marvel that the light-hearted maiden should seize eagerly the opportunity of escaping with Lorenzo into a brighter life. She is leaving a detestable prison, and does not hesitate to rob the jailer who has deprived her so long of all the joy of life. She is not altogether without some conscience of her 'heinous sin;' but it seems as though her father's conduct had abrogated all the rights of blood :—

Alack, what heinous sin is it in me,
To be ashamed to be my father's child !
But though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not to his manners.

We have a fine contrast of the results of two kinds of family training—in Portia's filial reverence and loyalty, and in Jessica's eagerness to forget her own kindred and father's house.

This incident of the flight of Jessica with a Christian lover gives significance to the wild fury with which Shylock pursues Antonio, and even insists upon the pound of flesh rather than the payment of the three thousand ducats ; his insatiable revenge sweeping away for the time his mercenary greed. In the exaction of the penalty he is goaded both by the ethnic memory of ages of wrong and by personal injury in the theft of his daughter and his gold. In the Law Court the crisis of the story is reached. All the leading characters are gathered together in eager suspense as to the legal decision. Portia, full of the excitement of her bold adventure, stands disguised as the lawyer for Antonio's defence, and through all her pleading has the secret assurance that Antonio's life can be saved. The problem with her is how to deal with Shylock. In this Jew she finds a 'psychological phenomenon' which quickens her eager intellect. She bends upon him those searching eyes ; she shrinks from him with all the antipathy of her pure and generous soul ; and yet her heart feels profound pity for a human creature so demonised by the spirit of revenge. She knows Antonio is safe, and only delays her final verdict in order to move the Jew to spare his victim. The law can force him to let his victim go, but she longs to melt Shylock into a voluntary concession of his claim.

Throughout the whole of that wonderful verbal contest

with Shylock, she is doing her best to save his soul. Unknown to himself, the Jew is at the bar of Divine Judgment. As the pleadings proceed, Portia opens the book of his inmost life ; and when not one thought of mercy can be found therein, she pronounces sentence accordingly. He has, indeed, sentenced himself, exposed the terrible condition of a soul depraved by unmitigated malice ; and his judge only confirms, in a few swift words, the verdict he has pronounced upon himself. I think that scene in court becomes wonderfully vital when we watch this sublime woman trying to save the soul of this wretched man. At the very first, she takes for granted that he is human ; she ignores altogether the thought that he will carry his suit to such a bloody extremity, and extort the pound of flesh that can in no way benefit him, and the loss of which means death to Antonio. When Portia, dressed as a young lawyer, enters the court, the investigation of the case commences thus :—

Duke. You are welcome : take your place.

Are you acquainted with the difference
That holds this present question in the court ?

Por. I am informed thoroughly of the cause.

Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew ?

Duke. Antonio and old Shylock, both stand forth.

Por. Is your name Shylock ?

Shy. Shylock is my name.

Por. Of a strange nature is the suit you follow ;
Yet in such rule that the Venetian law
Cannot impugn you as you do proceed.
You stand within his danger, do you not ?

(*To Antonio.*)

Ant. Ay, so he says.

Por. Do you confess the bond ?

Ant. I do.

Por. Then *must* the Jew be merciful.

I have italicised '*must*,' because it crystallises in a single word the first plea of Portia to save Shylock from his baser self; by saying, 'then *must* the Jew be merciful,' she enforces the divine necessity of goodness, the natural impulse of an undepraved heart to pitifulness and pardon. 'Why,' she seems to say, 'what need is there for any further argument? Why this forensic quibbling? The bond is acknowledged by both, but *of course* it cannot be enforced. Even if the law allows the pound of flesh, it *cannot* be required. Shylock is a man possessed of that emotion of mercy which is the very breath of God within the soul. There is a higher verdict than the Court of Venice, even the protest of human nature itself against unbridled and un pitying revenge. That surely settles the matter without further debate. It all rests with Shylock; he is a man with a heart in his bosom, and at once he will deny his claim to exact so cruel a bond. Then *must* the Jew be merciful.' But alas! Shylock cannot even understand a plea like this; Portia speaks a divine language he has never learnt. To him that transcendent *MUST* of beautiful and vital necessity becomes translated into the compulsion of mechanical force:—

On what compulsion *must* I? tell me that.

That repulsion of her pleading instantly rouses Portia's heart and intellect to their loftiest sweep of thought and feeling; the very suggestion of the amenableness of love to force strikes her soul into a sublime vision of the absolute Love, the Mercy which endureth for ever and is great above the heavens. Remember that Shylock has asked how he is to be *compelled* to mercy, and then listen to the answer which bursts from the lips of this inspired woman:—

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

Upon the place beneath : it is twice blest ;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes :
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest : it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown ;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings ;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway ;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself ;
And earthly power doth then shew likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation : we do pray for mercy ;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea ;
Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there.

But no appeal to higher motives has the slightest influence with this man ; he will take the chance of all consequences in this world or the next :—

My deeds upon my head ! I crave the law,
The penalty and forfeit of my bond.

Still Shylock shall have every chance afforded to him to escape the doom which must follow his strict exactment of the letter of the bond. Portia has failed to move him by her plea for mercy ; now she will appeal to his avarice. Here Bassanio is ready to discharge the debt ten times over to save the life of his friend ; will not the creditor take the money and set his victim free ? No ! In this pursuit of Antonio Shylock now exposes himself as a MURDERER. By his own confession he will be satisfied with nothing but the death of the man he hates ; he is making the course of

Venetian law the instrument of a murderous design upon a citizen ; he is wresting a formal 'right' into a deadly wrong. And yet Portia hesitates, defers the final sentence, to give the man a last opportunity to relent. Her last appeal for pity is in this passage :—

Por. Have by some surgeon, Shylock, on your charge,
To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death.

Shy. Is it so nominated in the bond ?

Por. It is not so express'd : But what of that ?

'Twere good you do so much for charity.

Shy. I cannot find it ; 'tis not in the bond.

Now that all the force of Portia's eloquence has proved in vain, she is prepared to let the doom descend upon him. Shylock draws the knife, Antonio bares his breast ; then at that fatal moment Portia steps between them, and in calm, deliberate voice declares the danger in which the Jew stands :—

Tarry a little ; there is something else.
This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood ;
The words expressly are 'a pound of flesh :'
Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh ;
But, in the cutting it, if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate
Unto the state of Venice.

'Is that the law ?' asks Shylock ; to which Portia replies :—

Thyself shalt see the Act :

For, as thou urgest justice, be assured,
Thou shalt have justice, more than thou desirest.

Shylock has been standing upon what he calls his 'right' as nominated in the bond ; but now he finds that there is

a Higher Law, wherein it is nominated that every design against human life shall be treated as a crime. The letter of a legal bond must not be employed to defeat the very purpose for which the law exists; human nature is higher and older than any forensic code, and only those institutions are valid which rest upon the eternal foundations of righteousness. Shylock defends his course by saying :—

An oath, an oath, I have an oath in heaven ;
Shall I lay perjury upon my soul ?

But no oath is binding against the oath of the Universe ; Shylock is enforcing a personal ‘right’ to an extremity whereby it becomes a social wrong ; he appeals to the law, and the letter of the law seems to be in his favour ; but he cannot take advantage of his legal ‘right’ without violating the spirit of the law, which will condemn him as a murderer if he spills a drop of Antonio’s blood. That is the irony of the position which Shylock has deliberately taken ; that is the *reductio ad absurdum* of his persistent appeal to what is nominated in the bond,—‘Take your pound of flesh, but in the act be prepared for condemnation as a murderer.’

Shylock now finds himself caught in his own toils ; he can scarcely stammer out the few sentences ascribed to him in the remainder of the scene. His scheme of revenge is completely baffled ; but at least he will have his money ; if they will pay him thrice the bond, he will leave the court. But now the severity of Portia appears. This man, who cannot respond to the appeal of mercy, must be put through some terrible discipline to teach him the enormity of his crime. He has appealed unto Cæsar, and to Cæsar shall he go. He has stood by the strict letter of the bond, and by it shall he abide. The money was offered, and he refused it in the open court, and not a ducat shall he now receive.

Let him take what is nominated in the bond—a strict pound of flesh—but not one drop of blood. Shylock is leaving court, foiled of his revenge, when Portia calls him back. The law has a hold of him of which he has never dreamt. Even though he has not taken the pound of flesh, the Higher Law of Venice condemns him as a criminal in intention if not in act. ‘He that hateth his brother is a murderer.’ It is clear that he has deliberately contrived the death of a citizen, and for such a crime his goods are forfeit to the state, and he himself liable to the penalty of death unless he can find mercy with the Duke.

We cannot avoid a feeling of compassion for the miserable Jew as he stands distracted, caught on every side in the meshes of the net which he himself has spread ; we are thankful that his life is spared on condition that he draws a deed bequeathing his goods to his daughter Jessica. As he totters from the judgment seat, crushed beneath his woe, his last words are these :—

I pray you, give me leave to go from hence ;
I am not well : send the deed after me,
And I will sign it.

3. HEAVENLY HARMONY AND EARTHLY BLISS.

THE play which threatened to be a gloomy tragedy closes in joy and love. The fifth act opens at Belmont, where the Christian bridegroom and his Jewish bride forget their differences of race as they commune together on earthly music and heavenly harmony. After the tension of our minds during that painful trial at Venice, what a relief we find in this charming scene ! Lorenzo and Jessica are waiting at Belmont for Portia's return ; it is a lovely night ; nature is calm and beautiful ; the landscape

is flooded with moonlight ; and thus they exchange their feelings :—

Lor. How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank !
Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears : soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica. Look, how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold :
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubims ;
Such harmony is in immortal souls ;
But, whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.—

Enter Musicians.

Come, ho ! and wake Diana with a hymn :
With sweetest touches pierce your mistress' ear
And draw her home with music. (*Music.*)

Jes. I am never merry when I hear sweet music.

Lor. The reason is, your spirits are attentive :
For do but note a wild and wanton herd,
Or race of youthful and unhandled colts,
Fetching mad bounds, bellowing and neighing loud,
Which is the hot condition of their blood ;
If they but hear perchance a trumpet sound,
Or any air of music touch their ears,
You shall perceive them make a mutual stand,
Their savage eyes turn'd to a modest gaze
By the sweet power of music : therefore the poet
Did feign that Orpheus drew trees, stones and floods
Since nought so stockish, hard and full of rage,
But music for the time doth change his nature.
The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,

Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils ;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night
And his affections dark as Erebus :
Let no such man be trusted.

As they converse Portia and Nerissa approach ; they have scarcely been welcomed when Bassanio, Antonio and Gratiano also arrive from Venice. Then we have that pretty quarrel about the rings, which serves the useful purpose of revealing to their startled husbands that Portia and her maid were the lawyer and the clerk whom they met in Venice. The passing cloud of misunderstanding is dispelled, Lorenzo receives the rich dowry of his wife, Antonio hears the good news that his argosies have come safely into harbour, and earthly joy seems perfect. As they discuss these wonderful events, the night is passing into early morning, and the new dawn is a symbol of the blessedness which shall crown these lives after such a season of calamity. Wrath and Terror have passed away ; Mercy is triumphant and Love supreme.



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